# How creative writers write: interviews with successful publishing writers

by

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## Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date: 1 September 2010

# Abstract

This thesis describes a qualitative investigation of the creative writing processes of successful publishing authors in the South African context. Four successful South African authors of fiction were interviewed with the intention of garnering current, local insights into the creative writing process in order to nuance this field of knowledge and to challenge reductive, undynamic ways of thinking about it. What these creative writers say about their writing processes is discussed in the context of previous empirical research on the writing process and the creative process in the related fields of composition studies and psychology. The resulting theoretical paradigm for the study was a flexible, recursive cognitive process model of the writing process within the context of a particular domain and field, in opposition to a stage model of writing or models of writing that are devoid of social and affective context.

Interviews with Margie Orford, Imraan Coovadia, Lesley Beake and John van de Ruit investigated how expert creative writers work in the South African context and explored contributing factors to the writing process, from initial inspiration or origination of ideas through to submission of completed manuscripts for publication. The creative writers in question are experienced authors who have published more than once as the intention was to discover what successful or established authors of literary fiction do, with an eye to making a contribution to current international attempts at theorising the field of creative writing. The results of this research indicated clear support for most of the combined underlying theories and hypotheses discussed in the literature study, with an indication of some areas that required further refining and research, such as the impact of situational variables on the writing process. Finally some suggestions are made as to how the theoretical models might be improved through combination and comparison with one another and with more extensive empirical research, and some of the implications of this research for creative writing pedagogy and the development of novice writers are explored.

# Opsomming

Hierdie tesis beskryf ’n kwalitatiewe ondersoek van die kreatiewe skryfprosesse van suksesvolle gepubliseerde outeurs in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks. Onderhoude is met vier suksesvolle fiksieskrywers gevoer met die doel om hedendaagse, plaaslike insig in die kreatiewe skryfproses te verkry ten einde hierdie kennisgebied te nuanseer en reduserende, ondinamiese denke daaroor aan te veg. Hierdie kreatiewe skrywers se beskrywing van hul skryfproses word bespreek teen die agtergrond van vorige empiriese navorsing oor die skryfproses en die kreatiewe proses in die verwante gebiede van stylstudies en sielkunde. Die teoretiese paradigma vir die studie wat hieruit gespruit het, was ’n buigsame, rekursiewe kognitiewe prosesmodel van die skryfproses in die konteks van ’n spesifieke domein en gebied, in teenstelling met ’n faseskryfmodel of skryfmodelle sonder enige maatskaplike en affektiewe konteks.

Deur middel van onderhoude met Margie Orford, Imraan Coovadia, Lesley Beake en John van de Ruit is ondersoek hoe ervare kreatiewe skrywers in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks werk, en faktore wat tot die skryfproses bydra, is ondersoek. Sodanige proses strek van aanvanklike inspirasie of die oorsprong van idees tot die inlewering van voltooide manuskripte vir publikasie. Die betrokke kreatiewe skrywers is bedrewe outeurs wat reeds meer as een keer gepubliseer het, aangesien die voorneme was om uit te vind hoe suksesvolle of gevestigde outeurs te werk gaan met die oog daarop om ’n bydrae te maak tot huidige internasionale pogings om die gebied van kreatiewe skryfwerk te teoretiseer. Die resultate van hierdie studie toon duidelike ondersteuning vir die meeste van die gekombineerde onderliggende teorieë en hipoteses wat in die literatuurstudie bespreek is, alhoewel daar ’n aanduiding is dat sommige gebiede verdere verfyning en navorsing verg, byvoorbeeld die impak van situasionele veranderlikes op die skryfproses. Laastens word enkele aanbevelings gemaak oor hoe die teoretiese modelle verbeter kan word deur kombinasie en vergelyking met ander modelle en deur meer omvattende empiriese navorsing, en die implikasies van hierdie navorsing vir die pedagogie van kreatiewe skryfwerk en die ontwikkeling van amateurskrywers word ook ondersoek.

## Acknowledgements

My warmest thanks go to the authors who participated in this study. They are all successful creative people and as such have little precious time to spare. Margie Orford fitted my interview in while she was in the final throes of completing her latest novel, while Imraan Coovadia squeezed me into a working day divided between writing at home and his duties as a lecturer at the University of Cape Town. Lesley Beake juggled my interview with the many writing identities she holds together and John van de Ruit cheerfully extended our interview time and signed books for me and a colleague despite having just completed a staggeringly exhausting spate of book signings and country-wide publicity tours that week. They gave generously of their time, responding to many emails to arrange the interviews and allowing me in most cases to go well over the two hour allowance for the visits. They also welcomed me into their homes and working spaces, let me take photographs of their rough drafts and even, in Lesley Beake's case, allowed me to borrow and copy a file full of drafts and notes that in itself is a treasure trove that could support a few doctoral dissertations and which I do not feel I have done justice within the limits of this Masters research. In addition, one or two have read rough drafts of the chapters on their interviews and commented and answered further clarifying questions.

It is a risk putting yourself and your working methods under the academic microscope and in the public eye as there were no promises of anonymity for this study. In fact, it was quite the opposite as the recordings of interviews and the transcripts are to be made publically available in the University of Stellenbosch's library. Even as the thesis was being written the participants were aware that I was presenting papers on their interviews in South Africa and the UK. Yet, throughout the research, they were open, friendly and enthusiastic in their participation.

I would not have coped with an undertaking of this scope without the consistently enthusiastic encouragement of my supervisor, Dr Shaun Viljoen. He must be thanked for so many things it is difficult to know what to single out. He helped me identify shortcomings and celebrate successes along the way with a gentle equanimity that soothed me and allowed the work to continue flowing smoothly through both triumphs and setbacks. His suggestions on everything from style to interviewing techniques were invaluable and I learnt much from him on the writing process through his guidance on my own writing. Few can say they enjoyed writing their thesis, but Dr Viljoen made this possible. His wonderful skill with words and his wide reading made it a privilege to work with him. Dr Viljoen and the English Department of the University of Stellenbosch also have my thanks for bursaries that helped cover the costs of presenting a paper on my research at the Great Writing Conference in Wales in June 2009 as well as the expenses of transcript typing and editing.

My heartfelt thanks go to the Department of Curriculum studies in the Faculty of Education, for a generous allocation of study leave in 2009 to help me to write my thesis; with special thanks to Professor Christa Van der Walt for the mentorship and encouragement I needed to follow my heart in choosing my research focus.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Haig MacRobert, for his unfailing love, support and encouragement; for listening to endless monologues on the latest

developments of this research without ever looking bored; and his patience in helping me find a happy balance between our home life with a vivacious toddler, my work commitments and the demands of producing a thesis. His steadfast belief in my writing abilities has sustained me and his sense of humour helped me gain many surprising insights as I wrestled with the ideas presented in these pages.

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# Chapter One

## 1.1 Introduction: rationale and relevance of research

This thesis explores a qualitative investigation of the creative writing processes of successful publishing authors in the South African context. Four successful South African authors of fiction were interviewed with the intention of garnering current, local insights into the creative writing process in order to nuance this field of knowledge and to challenge reductive, undynamic ways of thinking about it.

Within the traditional framework in South African university's language departments, creative writing is studied as a product in literature courses, rather than as a process. The focus is on the world created in a text or the socio-political world in which the text is situated. Studying the writing process itself is a relatively new field of enquiry; studying the creative writing process even more so. The interviews conducted with contemporary writers sought to broaden this perspective so that the process of creating textual worlds in a particular context could be investigated.

This research explores whether what these creative writers say about their writing processes corroborates or contradicts previous research on the writing process and the creative process. This involves investigating how expert creative writers write in the South African context and exploring contributing factors to the writing process, from initial inspiration or origination of ideas through to submission of completed manuscripts for publication. The creative writers in question are experienced authors who have published more than once as the intention is to discover what successful or established authors of literary fiction do.

Although there has been valuable research on creative writing since the 1970s, Kaufman (2002: 27) asserts that a significant knowledge gap remains:

> Research on creativity, in general, has increased over the past few decades, but there are still many questions to be answered about creative writing….Although the amount of research being done on creative writing has increased since 1991, it still suffers in comparison with other areas of research in creativity (Kaufman, 2002: 22-28 ).

Graeme Harper, editor of the *International journal for the theory and practice of creative writing* (2006: 1), describes creative writing as a field of enquiry that is 'a complex, multi-dimensional critical landscape in which different layers form part of the whole, emerging through an examination of work ' "in process" and in reflection on process and product.' He maintains it is imperative that debate is fostered on what the 'dimensions, styles and directions' are of the creative process, both prior to and after a process is complete, 'and in reflection on process and product' and how they can be 'encouraged, directed, developed, enhanced' . He states that these are not only core questions for creative writers, but also for 'those involved in the research and teaching of creative writing' (Harper 2006: 1). While at one time the feeling was that 'revealing or investigating the undersurface of creative endeavour was akin to x-raying a loved one in order to discover their true feelings toward you' (Harper 2006: 2), this attitude is changing as we 'come to suspect that human kind is more directly

responsible for its own success and failures' (Harper 2006: 2-3) than was previously believed.

In other words, there is a continually growing sense that creative writing can be studied, investigated and taught. Furthermore, Harper maintains that '[i]f tools, skills, principles and theories/models are known, then it is pedagogically, aesthetically, personally and holistically – as well as politically, within the context of institutional and governmental agenda-setting – important to reveal them' (Harper 2006: 1). Creative writing teacher and researcher Michelene Wandor (2004: 113) points out that 'we are not longer expending energy on arguing that [creative writing] *can* be taught; rather, in a situation where it is *being* widely taught, it is possible – I would argue vital – to look with respect and vigour at how it takes its place in the academy' and she echoes my own and Graeme Harper's feeling that '[t]his is…not a dry-as-dust project. It springs from my passion for language in all its forms as much as from my impatience at the muddle surrounding [creative writing].' Moreover, she declares there is an urgent need for 'theorization of [creative writing] pedagogic practices, and some rigorous discussion of the ways they are derived from the underlying premises' (2004:114). It is the underlying premises that hopefully will be better understood through the research forming this thesis.

Wandor's analysis of the knowledge gap in the field of creative writing emerged from a study of a number of American books 'which regularly appear on [creative writing] course reading lists in the UK' and claims that 'the same principles underlie the majority of UK texts,'

> but virtually never explicitly. Now you nearly see it, mostly you don't, and now you definitely can't. The pedagogies are discernible, though rarely consciously theorized. Increasing numbers of such books testify to the existence of a "subject" with implicitly shared approaches which are rarely, if ever, spelled out (Wandor, 2004: 114).

An additional problem is that creative writers often embed their descriptions of writing in richly creative language and imbue the creative process with mystery and metaphor. This does not make an exploration of their writing processes is untenable, however. As Kaufman (2002: 28) succinctly puts it: 'Some may claim that trying to study the creative mind is impossible, but as Feist (1999) argued, studying the behavioural dispositions of the creator is not'. The same reasoning arguably applies to this research: it may be impossible to know exactly what is in an author's mind as he or she works on a piece of creative writing, a problem which is explained in Chapter Two, but it is not impossible to study their behaviour or descriptions of their thinking about their writing processes.

Cultural psychologist, Jerome Bruner (2003, in Armstrong 2007: 5) argues that 'storytelling is implicit to the creation of human culture. The process of creating and telling stories appears to be fundamental to understanding of not only *what* it is to be human, but *how* it is we are human' (author's emphasis). He declares the 'narrative gift' we all possess to be 'as distinctly human as our upright posture and our opposable thumb and forefinger.' This makes creative writing as a form of storytelling a worthy field of study. However, as anyone who has attempted writing will testify, there is an enormous challenge when it comes to writing stories, so, as

one teacher put it, 'even though [novice writers] might be sure they have an important story to tell, they are often disappointed at how flat and uneven the story seems when they write it down' (Armstrong, 2007: 6). This is because 'the craft of the written narrative is extremely complex, and uses very different skills than oral storytelling' (Armstrong, 2007: 6). We need to 'compare the composing strategies of good and poor writers' (Flower & Hayes, 1981: 368) in order to learn more about this creative writing processes.

In 2008 a paper on the preliminary work for this thesis was presented at an international conference on the Humanities in Africa. A typical response essentially hinged on the question 'Why bother to study expert writers in relation to creative writing pedagogy when so few, if any, creative writing learners will ever have the talent to become publishing writers of fiction? Why not simply focus on basic technicalities of language?' Wandor (2004: 115) takes up this gauntlet in her treatise on the theorisation of creative writing pedagogy when she writes:

> It is telling that it is only [creative writing] literature which reiterates this point [about genius and talent not being teachable] *ad nauseam.* Pedagogically, as all teachers know, this is true of any academic discipline; in order to teach philosophy, it is not essential to tell students they may not become the new Bertrand Russell, and the same applies to other longstanding subjects.

However, it would be impossible to conceive of a theory of physics that does not involve the working methods and theories of great physicists, or a theory of philosophy that does not involve some breakdown of the argumentation processes of great philosophers. It is pedagogically relevant to study the writing process of successful publishing writers if this will aid greater understanding of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that novice writers might need to develop.

An interest in the pedagogical implications of a study of expert writers of fiction stems from my occupation as a language teacher in the Faculty of Education in the University of Stellenbosch. I am involved in teacher training on three levels: as a teacher of professional English skills, including writing; as a teacher of an introductory level didactic theory of English language teaching course; and as a lecturer of a B Ed Honours module on creative writing pedagogy. While the focus of thesis is not a pedagogical one, but rather a study of the writing processes of expert writers, in these roles it is of concern to me to understand creative writing both in terms of what is happening in schools and the underlying models of the writing process this implies, and to explore potential ways of improving pedagogy through building knowledge of the creative writing processes of successful writers.

Within this paradigm, there are two principle ways in which writing is studied. The first is to focus entirely on what happens with novice writers when various techniques for teaching writing are applied, to see which method yields the best results. The other is to study the techniques and processes of expert writers. Both types of research are important if we are to 'know what separates expertise from mediocrity and what is needed … to foster continuing growth in competence' (Scardamalia, 1993) There are distinct differences between how novice and expert writers write (Kaufman, 2002, Humes 1983) and Humes (1983: 214) maintains that 'such findings are certain to be significant for the teaching of writing.'

Vera Brown, an experienced teacher trainer at UNISA, asserted that: 'many learners are hopelessly misguided by their teachers when it comes to writing. And because many educators have modelled the process wrongly in their own minds they are unable to give their learners the guidance they need' (Brown & Viljoen, Eds. 2003: 174). It appears that this poor modelling extends to national departmental level in South Africa. The revised national curriculum matriculation examinations, written for the first time in 2008, reinstated the 'creative writing' paper (paper three) and now evaluate the writing process as well as its products. Under each question in the third paper, is the instruction: 'You are required to show ALL aspects of the writing process: planning, writing, proofreading and editing' (Department of Education, 2006: 3, 4, 6, 8).

The writing process explicated in these exam paper instructions is an outmoded 'stage model' critiqued by Flower & Hayes(1981: 365) and other writing researchers[1], whose research into how expert writers work has indicated clearly that they do not compose in clean-cut stages This research, in fact, discredited the linear model of the composing process' (Humes, 1983, in Fitzgerald, 1987: 482), 'because [it offers] an inadequate account of the… intellectual process of composing' (Flower & Hayes, 1981: 367).

However, much of the debate and research on this topic has been conducted overseas and more has been done in the field of composition studies than in the field of creative writing, so currently there does not appear to be a widespread awareness of this research in South Africa. There appears to also be very little recent empirical research on the creative writing process internationally. Key texts presenting empirical research pertinent to this thesis are discussed in detail in chapter two.

The final personal rationale for the topic of this thesis is that I see myself as a creative writer in training. I have achieved some success in publication but feel I am still a novice with much to learn. Thus it benefits my development if I study and compare the writing processes of expert writers with my own.

### 1.2 Limitation of study and definition of terms

While representing a limited study of four authors, this thesis is intended to contribute to a growing body of knowledge, adding a fresh perspective to the questions raised in the field, while potentially raising new questions which will in turn require further research. Under these circumstances, one is faced with the research dilemma of being able to say a lot about a little or a little about a lot and it is the second approach that was chosen. As a result this thesis aims to describe and analyze the overall writing processes of the selected writers in fairly broad strokes in the light of the literature research discussed in Chapter Two. Each sub process and each author warrants a separate research project of its own, and much of this research has been and will continue to be developed into conference presentations and journal papers as well as articles for professional journals[2] especially where the scope of the thesis did not allow for inclusion of all the material generated from the interviews.

[1] Cf. Humes, 1983, for a summary of research on the writing process.

[2] Examples of my academic journal articles include 'Right before writing' – first presented at The International Conference on the Humanities in Pretoria, 2008, and published in *the Journal of Literary Studies* (June 2010). An article derived from part of the interview with Margie Orford appears on the second edition of TET (online journal

An additional limitation is that the answers of four authors cannot be generalized to the entire population of creative writers in South Africa or to creative writers in general. However, interesting similarities and differences might emerge that could inspire further investigation and corroborate or challenge previous research in the field.

Most terms used to clarify the perimeters of this study are defined in the literature review in Chapter Two. Where other terms that might be unfamiliar are introduced, these are either defined in the context of the discussion or in footnotes, as appropriate. Some key terms are clarified below as they help to define the overall perimeters of the research.

'Creative writing' is variously referred to as fiction writing and 'imaginative writing' (cf. Wandor, 2004: 113). This study refers to creative writing but is limited to writers of full length prose fiction, not poets, journalists, academic writers or creative non-fiction authors. It is acknowledged that all forms of writing have potentially more similarities than dissimilarities, and all forms of writing involve a degree of creativity[3]. However, as much research on the writing process has not been conducted using explicitly creative writers there is clearly the biggest need to be specific in this. Moreover, as there appears to be more research on poets than on novelists, it was felt that studying writers of books rather than poetry might be a fruitful avenue to pursue. However, the participants in this study have written across genres, including poetry and non fiction and so have insights into all these types of writing.

The term 'publishing' writer is borrowed from the title of Berkenkotter and Murray's 1983 article, *Decisions and revisions: The planning strategies of a publishing writer*, which is one of the key texts discussed in Chapter two. This implies a writer who is continuing to write and be published, as opposed to the author of one successfully published text who has not written or published since.

Publication as a selection criteria indicating success as a writer stems from a need to limit criteria clearly for the scope of thesis. Csikzentmihalyi's argument was used here, that exceptional creativity 'is never only in the mind of a person' (1996: 27) but is rather located in three places: the domain, the field and the individual. This systemic model of creativity accounts for the need for education for creative people because knowledge such as our knowledge of language and of writing and reading are mediated by symbols and as such is extra somatic[4] rather than passed on through genetic codes. This extra somatic information largely makes up what is commonly referred to as a culture and has to be deliberately passed on by others and learned (1997: 37).

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for teachers run by the English Academy) in 2009 and a paper on the significance of the popularity of John van de Ruit's books was accepted for presentation at the Theories. Applications. Principles. Conference on Humour in Poland at Piotrkow University in September 2009.

[3] Cf. Badenhorst, 2007 on creative research writing, for example.

[4] In other words, regardless of one's genetic aptitude for language, writing and reading are not skills one is born with; rather, they have to be learnt.

The domain referred to in this model 'consists of a set of symbolic rules and procedures' (1997: 27) which are 'nested in what we call culture, or the symbolic knowledge shared by a particular society or culture and by humanity as a whole' (1997: 28). Writing falls into the domain of the word in this categorization, which includes all literary forms such as novels and poetry (1997: 237). A person can not be creative in a domain to which she 'has not been exposed.' Some learning of the rules of the domain is imperative to success. This does not mean that a novelist has to have completed a course on writing novels, but that they have been exposed to a reasonable level of language training in order to be able to manipulate the grammar of a language to get a desired effect, and that they have learned to read and appreciate good books in their chosen genre.

It takes an effort of 'mental energy to learn the rules' of a domain and by doing so 'we immediately step beyond the boundaries of biology and enter the realm of cultural evolution' and yet not everyone bothers to invest this energy (1997: 37). For many, 'domains are primarily ways to make a living' but for some, the choice of a particular domain can stem from 'a powerful calling' and 'acting within the rules of the domain is rewarding in itself, they would keep doing what they do even if they were not paid for it, just for the sake of doing the activity' (37). Very common themes for creative people choosing domains as varied as mathematics, music, nuclear physics and poetry are 'to bring order to experience, to make something that will endure after one's death, to do something that allows humankind to go beyond its present powers' (38).

Domains can both help and hinder creativity. For example, an education system could seek ways to increase and develop the creative potential of its novice writers. According to Csikszentmihalyi, 'the company where knowledge is better structured, more central, and more accessible is likely to be the one where – other things [such as funding] still being equal – innovations are going to happen' (1997: 38-39). In other words, the accessibility and clarity of underlying knowledge about the domain is of critical importance to developing new creative writers.

The field 'includes all the individuals who act as gatekeepers in the domain. It is their job to decide whether a new idea or product should be included in the domain….It is this field that selects what new works of art deserve to be recognised, preserved and remembered' (1997: 28). The field, in other words, provides 'a witness to the appropriateness of the contribution' (29). An example of the field in creative writing would therefore be the publishing industry and literary critics. For inclusion into the appropriate domain and in order to be judged as creative, would require that an individual's creative work be selected by the field for inclusion into the appropriate domain (1997: 28). Thus

> even if the rules are learned, creativity cannot be manifested in the absence of a field that recognizes and legitimizes the novel contributions. A child might possibly learn mathematics on his or her own by finding the right books and the right mentors, but cannot make a difference in the domain unless recognised by teachers and journal editors who will witness to the appropriateness of the contribution (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 29).

In the domain of the word, the field is most powerfully represented by the publishing industry who tends to exert the most influence in terms of witnessing of the contribution of a piece of writing. Even apparently independent creative writing

competitions are often linked to the promise of publication, publication is often a prerequisite for entry into many of the bigger competitions that recognise great writing, and schools and universities only prescribe published literature. In short, outside of being part of a swamp of free publications on the internet, it is very difficult to get wide distribution without at the very least spending a fair amount of money on self-publishing and self promotion. For better or worse, publishing and the attached distribution of a book or poem seems to be the gold standard for success in the writing domain.

The use of this as a benchmark for selection purposes in this study does not in any way imply an uncritical ratification of this state of affairs. It is simply an acknowledgement that this is currently the reality and cannot be ignored. Csikszentmihalyi points out that it is possible for a field which is not competent in a domain to take control of it (1997: 44). An example is when a fanatically religious or fascist government makes unilateral decisions on the value of art in a particular society, as happened to the publishing industry in South Africa under Apartheid censorship.

Some of the most commonly given advice for authors who wish to publish is that they study what has already been published. Books on creative writing admonish 'read widely!' and publisher's web sites suggest that would-be published authors read through samples of their imprints before selecting where to send their work to see if it fits in with their style. This is part of how a writer learns more about the field and the domain in which he or she is writing. This means in this study questions were posed about the context of the field and the domain and the roles these had in both developing a particular successful writer's skill and in completing any published work. One has only to read the long lists of thanks at the front of any novel to see that the writing of it was not completed in isolation and many writers, especially poets, belong to a group who they use as critical readers before attempting publication. Csikszentmihalyi holds that if a person wishes to contribute creatively they need to work within a creative system and also reproduce this system in their mind (1997: 47). This is true of domains as diverse as physics, art and writing (1997: 47). With regards to writing, it is largely pointed out that you have to 'read, read, and read some more, and know what the critic's criteria for good writing are, before you can write creatively yourself.' (1997: 47) Part of the reason this knowledge is so important, is that it is essential to learn which of one's many creative ideas is viable or worth pursuing through to the point of having a final (publishable) product. One of Csikszentmihalyi's respondents describes this as developing the judgment to say, ' "This is good, I'll pursue this further" ' (1997: 50).

When it comes to the creative individual, Csikszentmihalyi's study found that perhaps the most frequent response to a question asking creative individuals to explain their success 'was that they were lucky. Being in the right place at the right time is an almost universal explanation' (1997: 46). This is not a denial of the importance of the individual's contribution, but it cannot be ignored as an 'important ingredient' (1997: 46) as it does help explain why many individuals with possibly equal talent to very successful writers, go unrecognized. The importance of chance contacts, government grants for one's particular gender or race at a particular point in history – all of these play a role in determining a creative individual's success. Of course, knowing what to do with luck when it strikes you, and recognizing lucky breaks, is something the

individual needs to be capable of doing or else all the luck in the world will do no good.

### 1.3 Overview of research design and method

The research followed a two-pronged approach of a literature study followed by semi-structured interviews with expert authors. The literature that defined the basic parameters and the context within which the study is situated has been discussed above. Further literature on empirical studies on writing and creativity, which provided the theoretical basis for both the compilation of interview schedules and the analysis of the interviews, is discussed in Chapter Two.

As a crude summary of the research discussed in Chapter Two, a reasonable working model of the cognitive processes involved in writing has been developed through extensive empirical research by Flower and Hayes, and this is combined with a model of the creative process developed through Csikszentmihalyi's research. The aim was to put these models into context, specifically by testing them as hypotheses against some current, South African, successful writers who went to South African schools and who write in South Africa. Thus the conclusions of research from the 80s and 90s, and ideas put about in writing workshops, more recent academic articles and textbooks are tested with focus questions aimed at the selected authors.

Authors were sought who fulfilled both research considerations and pragmatic ones. Pragmatic considerations included availability for and willingness of the author to be interviewed, which stemmed in part from the ease with which they could be contacted directly or through their publishers, and their proximity to either Cape Town or an airport. Research-bound considerations included their being publishing authors who have substantial track records in terms of either commercial or otherwise acknowledged (for example, prize-winning) success. In addition, where possible, the authors have been selected for the variety of work they have produced, in comparison to one another or because they have published across more than one genre.

Successfully publishing authors are not being privileged as the only 'good' writers. Much good writing is not published because of publisher's lists and market demands, not because it does not meet some industry standards. As discussed above, published authors were interviewed as they came closer to Csikszentmihalyi's definition of creative people who have established themselves in the domain and field of creative writing, and because a selection of authors is naturally subjective and it was appropriate to have my own tastes ratified in some way by the publishing industry, the reading public in South Africa and abroad and panels judging prize-winning writing. No attempt is made to classify the work of the selected authors as 'literary' or not as it was felt that this is a distracting controversy which belongs elsewhere in the field of English studies.

The first author interviewed was Margie Orford, an award-winning journalist, documentary film director and best-selling detective crime novelist whose work has been translated into several languages. She was followed by Imraan Coovadia, an award winning novelist, essayist and short story writer who teaches creative writing at the University of Cape Town. Next was Lesley Beake, prize-winning writer of over sixty books, mostly aimed at adolescents, and a magazine journalist. Finally, John Van de Ruit was interviewed after just having broken all South Africa's records for

book sales. His first book, *Spud,* has been turned into a film featuring actor John Cleese, and has been released in the UK and USA. A brief biography and a more extensive publishing history are provided for each author in their respective chapters. It was hoped that by asking quite specific questions based on what is already established about writing, some very interesting qualitative data on the writing process would emerge.

One of the major problems in studying creative writers, namely the fact that they are, by definition, creative and use divergent, original thinking (Barron, 1966: 158-159), means that their methods and writing processes are likely to be difficult to pin down. However, even listing important differences could be of enormous value in pointing to the fact that there is perhaps no *single* ideal method of writing creatively, a conclusion that would, hopefully, put a stop to writing processes being falsely standardized and tested in our school exams. Therefore, in addition to a literature study of research on the topic of writing processes and writers, semi-structured interviews as a research instrument were coupled with material on these authors available in the media.

Semi-structured interviews were used in an attempt to corroborate the findings of the literature study on creative writing processes and to facilitate comparison across the different authors by having the same interview schedule for each author. The interviews, however, are only *semi*-structured so as to 'allow for the probing and clarification of answers' and to acknowledge that there might be 'new emerging lines of inquiry' (Nieuwenhuis, in Maree, Ed. 2007: 87) which could be fruitful to pursue. In reality it in any case proved quite difficult to stick to the interview schedule as the authors thrived most when talking about the process in general or focusing on specific book projects and this involved some juggling to keep up with the unfolding interviews as exciting tangents were explored and some questions had to fall by the wayside. In the end, it was decided to allow the conversation to flow as far as naturally as possible, while still being guided by the focus questions, rather than trying to force the conversation to go according to a set plan. A sample of the interview schedule used is attached as Addendum C.

The interviews were recorded on Dictaphone and transcribed, and this data was compared with any notes taken during the interview. While not part of the original research design, photographs of some of the author's work environments and their drafts, files and notes, became part of the data capturing experience, as well email correspondence both before and after the interviews. Moreover, interview data was compared to online and other published interviews, articles or blogs written by or about the author in order to increase the trustworthiness and reliability of the study (Nieuwenhuis, in Maree, Ed. 2007: 80). It is worth remembering that qualitative research aims 'to engage in research that probes for a deeper understanding of a phenomenon and not to search for causal relationships' (Nieuwenhuis, in Maree, Ed. 2007: 81), and what is dealt with is 'not so much an exact, measurable finding, but an emerging reality' that can be described and analysed (Nieuwenhuis, in Maree, Ed. 2007: 81). The rationale for the interview questions and the coding of the transcripts will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

The structure of the interview is such that various aspects of the writing process would be identifiable and the use of a semi-structured interview meant that most

answers were comparable across authors and cold be checked against the theory. However, Henning explains that, with qualitative empirical studies such as this one, 'answers are not meant to be conclusive, but instead serve to further the agenda for discussion' (Gubrium & Holstein 2002 in Henning, 2004: 68). As part of this continuing discussion, respondents were asked to check conclusions drawn from interviews in a process referred to as 'stakeholder checks'. In this process, drafts of the author chapters, and in one case (Imraan Coovadia's) the transcript of the interview, were submitted to participants via email in order to 'sound out…initial understandings with them to verify whether [my] interpretation of what they have shared with [me] is correct' (Nieuwenhuis, in Maree, 2007: 113-114). However the authors preferred to keep this cross-checking to a minimum as they are very busy and John van de Ruit asked not to be troubled with any extra paperwork at all.

Three of the interviews were recorded in the context of the author's homes, while the fourth was conducted in a restaurant setting, and there is a conversational tone to parts of the interviews where it would have been artificial and, I believe, alienating for the participants if a formal academic tone had been maintained. Some valuable data emerged from the more casual conversational parts of the interview, such as interruptions caused by Orford's children's demands, and Van de Ruit's aversion to having children at this stage in his career, which was discovered when a toddler broke in on our restaurant interview.

The experience of interviewing all four authors was overwhelmingly positive from start to finish. All agreed to interviews immediately and were charming, patient and friendly through the making of arrangements, emailing of consent forms and checking details after the interviews. The idea to interview them in their homes came from Orford's generous suggestion that this would be an ideal place to conduct the interviews and her own remark (in an email) that this was 'part of the writing process'. Emboldened by this, the other authors were asked if the interviews could be conducted in their homes and all agreed. It was easiest to interview Van de Ruit at a hotel he was staying at during the Book Fair in Cape Town, but fortunately his home had been reviewed in an extensive article with large colour photos, by a property magazine and it was possible to discuss this with him via email. During the interviews, authors were very generous with their time and resources: Beake loaned her planning file for her latest book, *Hap*, to copy, even though she still needed it for the book's final edit; Coovadia emailed copies of some of his short stories and essays; Van de Ruit responded encouragingly to all emails, and Orford hauled out archives of drafts and planning pages so that some sample pages could be photographed.

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of Stellenbosch (see Addendum A). Authors were first approached by email to ascertain if they were willing to consider being interviewed. After they were more comprehensively informed, in writing, of what is being studied, and why and how the information is to be used, they were asked to sign that they give their informed consent to being recorded during the interviews and for the information to be used in published research. They were given the right to review transcripts and field notes and the ways in which the material is used for publication. Authors were informed that their names will be used in the study and that it is not an anonymous study. The informed consent form is attached as Addendum B.

### 1.4 Division of chapters

This thesis consists of a further six chapters. In Chapter two, the literature review is discussed, exploring both the knowledge gained and the limitations of key empirical research on the topic. Research on the writing process and the creative process is synthesized to form a conceptual framework for the interviews. Chapters three to six cover the interviews themselves, in the order in which they occurred. Each of these four chapters is devoted to a single author and discusses his or her background and publishing history and an analysis of their interview transcript. Transcripts are attached to the thesis as addenda and digital recordings of the interviews are available as part of the digital version of this thesis or by request from the library at the University of Stellenbosch, as requested by the Faculty of Art's ethics committee with regard to this study. The seventh chapter summarises and critically reflects on the overall interview data in comparison to the literature survey discussed in Chapter Two. Lastly, limitations discovered during the course of the study are summarised and recommendations are made for further research.

# Chapter Two

In order to learn more about the writing process, author and writing teacher Donald Murray (1982: 141) maintains that we need to study 'the activity at the workbench in the skull.' Writing is a cognitive process and getting into someone's skull is not easy. A good starting point was to examine different methods attempted by other researchers. A literature survey clarified how many studies on creative writing rely on biographical material on famous authors, or interviews with authors. Autobiographical works such as Margaret Atwood's *Negotiating with the dead: a writer on writing* (2002), or Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Living to tell the tale* (2003) are replete with the personal insights of authors as they put their (writing) worlds under the microscope. However, they are commercial books, and likely to highlight the extraordinary at the expense of mundane details that might tell us more about how writers actually work. Such material on a living author is invaluable, as one can compare what the author tells one in one's research to what he writes for a public audience. A writer straddles two worlds – public and solitary – and it can be advantageous to study contemporary authors with public profiles who are quoted in a number of newspaper articles and to hear them giving public talks. However, as with biographies, newspaper and television interviews are in themselves an art form. They can provide deep insights into writer's methods and styles, but do not facilitate clear comparison across writers and often focus on content rather than process. Where interviews do focus on process, there is a challenge typical in studies in the humanities: the fallibility of memory. According to writing researchers Flower and Hayes (1981: 368), introspective analyses by writers of their processes are 'notoriously inaccurate and likely to be influenced by their notions of what they should have done.'

However, more direct empirical studies of the writing process have been conducted in the sister field of composition studies, and empirical studies on the creative process have been conducted in the field of psychology. In this chapter, empirical research that underlies key theories of both the writing and the creative process are discussed, as these provide the rationale as well as the structure for the interview questionnaire that was developed and the analysis of the resulting interview transcripts. In this chapter, the methodologies of the empirical studies will be briefly outlined, before an attempt is made to synthesize the models of the writing and creative processes that resulted from these studies.

In composition studies, the writing process has been studied using methodologies including laboratory case studies, naturalistic studies, quasi-product studies (which look at writers' revision notes) and scans of left and right brain activity while writing (Humes, 1983: 202-205). Through this research, the linear model of the writing process has been discredited and more complex cognitive models of the writing process have been developed (Humes, 1983: 205). It has been established that the subprocesses of writing are recursive and that '[a]s a process, writing does not move in a straight line from conception to completion" (Humes, 1983: 205).

A seminal study that led to these conclusions was the five year long protocol analysis research of Flower and Hayes on both expert and novice writers, which led to a sophisticated cognitive process theory of writing with a good deal of evidence to

support it. They saw their model as a 'working hypothesis' (1981: 366)[5] that was testable if other researchers checked whether their conclusions were the same for other writers. Their gauntlet was taken up by researchers in the 1980s and into the 1990s, as research on a wide range of aspects of the writing process frequently refers to this article[6]. Above all, their resulting model of the writing process provided a tool for other researchers to think with.

Protocols, borrowed from psychological research methodology, are detailed records of a writer's process (Flower and Hayes in Humes, 1983: 203). In think-aloud protocols, writers are given a topic and asked to write in a laboratory. They are required to verbalize out loud everything that occurs in their minds as they write, including false starts, as if talking to themselves and this is recorded (Flower and Hayes, 1981: 368). Transcripts, matched to notes and text produced during a session, yield a detailed picture of the composing process. This method permits an examination of the 'workbench in the skull' by capturing 'the flow of thought that would otherwise remain unarticulated' (Berkenkotter and Murray, 1983: 167).

However, this research has the opposite problem to interviews and biographies, as it tends to lean towards 'context stripping,' and as such it was challenged by Berkenkotter (1983: 156), who cautioned: 'When researchers remove writers from their natural settings…to examine their thinking processes in the laboratory, they "create a context of a powerful sort, often deeply affecting what is being observed"'[1]. In an attempt to rectify this imbalance, Carol Berkenkotter conducted a naturalistic study by tracking a publishing author's daily writing habits in his normal writing sessions and settings. This was a groundbreaking first-hand exploration of a writer's world. While pioneering enviable research conditions, it is easy to see why this study remains unique.

First, a research participant must be found who writes frequently and who is engaged in at least one writing project at the time of the study. This writer has to agree to a new method of work, namely thinking aloud while writing, and allowing someone to record this, while observing his behaviour and taking notes, possibly in his home. Donald Murray, the writer who participated in this study, felt that this was 'merely a question of turning up the volume knob on the muttering [he does] as [he writes]' and that 'if there was any self-consciousness in the process it was helpful. [he] was, after all, practicing a craft, not performing magic' (1983: 170). However, he is accustomed to frequent public speaking and dictates final drafts to his wife. He did not baulk at the invasion of his privacy or interruptions to work time, but he believes that writers as teachers have an 'ethical obligation to write and to reveal [their] writing to [their] students' – a sentiment that Imraan Coovadia, a writer-teacher participant in my research, does *not* share.

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[5] For the following pages, where the discussion follows one particular article, (namely Flower and Hayes' 1981) all page references in brackets are to this article, and only references to other authors have been referenced fully.

[6] For example, Rose, 1981 (writer's block), Berkenkotter and Murray, 1983 (planning and revision); Humes 1983 (the composing process); Spack, 1984 (invention strategies); Reither, 1985 (redefining the writing process); Fitzgerald, 1987 (revision); Englert, Raphael, Anderson, et al, 1991 (self-talk and writing strategies).

Beyond the reservations an author might have about and invasion of her (often solitary) world, such a study demands significant commitments of money and time. Over the course of two months, Berkenkotter's research generated over one hundred hours of recordings and involved the mailing of audio-tape dialogues between author and researcher, as well as the correlation of audio material with her observation notes and the drafts he was working on.

Berkenkotter's study did confirm Flower and Hayes' contention that an author cannot reconstruct everything that he or she does, especially if asked about it too long after the writing, partly because the daily evolving text requires all of his mental energy (1983: 170). In addition, what the writer is actually doing and what he thinks he is doing can be different. For example, South African writer Lesley Beake describes as revision some aspects of her writing process which in fact involved generating fresh ideas and planning how to fit these into her existing text.

These findings could lead to a suspicion of all interview-based investigations into the writer's world which are, by nature, retrospective. However, privileging one kind of study over another is less helpful than seeing what can be learnt by examining many different kinds of studies to look for points of agreement and divergence.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who conducted interviews in his research on creativity, posited that it is dangerous to aim for objectivity while discrediting a participant's perceptions of how they go about their work as completely unreliable because they are 'expressions of a bourgeois ideology' or 'a narrative device' in the context of an interview' or even as the opposite of the truth, because the participant is suppressing unpleasant reality (1997: 17). It is necessary to listen with 'open skepticism' in order to reach a deeper understanding of the way a creative person experiences and creates their world. While there is much that an author cannot accurately remember or explain, the author's environment and working conditions and the author's subjective perceptions and explanations also form valid avenues to explore if we are to attain a truly multi-dimensional understanding of the cognitive process of creative writing. Writers are creators of a particular fictional world and also their own inner worlds within a particular context.

A gap in the composition studies research is that it does not deal with specifically creative writing. Csikszentmihalyi chose to study creativity by interviewing ninety-one respondents and his research provides a counter-balance to the context stripping of Flower and Hayes' study and the individuality of Berkenkotter and Murray's. Furthermore, it places the creative process of writers in the context of other individuals, ranging from inventors to historians, who had made significant creative contributions to their domains.

Csikszentmihalyi's research did not uncover one definitive way to describe a universal 'creative process' but he found some common threads which ran across domains and individuals and which he felt might 'constitute the core characteristics' of a process likely to lead to a creative outcome (1997: 78). He cautions that his five stage model's simplicity could be misleading, but as with Flower and Hayes' model, it provides a way to conceptualize a complex cognitive process. It is discussed in

conjunction with Flower and Hayes' model and Berkenkotter's suggested adaptations to this, below. Briefly outlined, the stages he proposes are the following:

1) The emergence of problems;
2) Presented and discovered problems;
3) The mysterious time (or incubation);
4) The "Aha!" experience; and
5) The 99 Percent perspiration.

It was difficult to see the first two stages as different from one another, as is evident from the headings. Presented and discovered problems appeared in his exposition to be an example of the type of problems that might emerge rather than a particular stage in the creative process and thus these categories have been merged in the integrated discussion that follows.

In addition to positioning creativity within the context of the domain and field discussed in Chapter One, Csikszentmihalyi analyses 'the goals and working methods of five writers' of novels and poetry (1997: 237), although he draws his conclusions about the domain of the word not only from these research participants but also from other renowned creative writers in his larger study, conducted between 1990 and 1995, after Flower and Hayes' (1981) and Berkenkotter and Murray's (1983) studies. Unlike Flower and Hayes research, Csikszentmihalyi's selection criteria for respondents were explicitly stated as three-fold. Firstly, the person needed to have made a significant contribution to an important domain of culture such as literature (the domain of the word). Secondly, the participant had to be at least sixty years old and 'still actively involved in that domain' (1997: 12). In addition to these criteria, he wished to interview the same number of men and women and as wide a range of cultural backgrounds as possible (1997: 245).

The models of the writing process developed by Flower and Hayes and Csikszentmihalyi provided a conceptual framework for the interviews conducted with South African publishing writers for this research. They paved the way for a contextualized exploration of the writing processes of these authors in methodical way with a common vocabulary of concepts that would allow for comparison across authors and with the underlying theory. As the Flower and Hayes' model is the most comprehensive, it has been used as the base for the following discussion, with criticisms, suggested modifications or supporting evidence from other researchers such as Berkenkotter and Murray in particular. In addition, there are suggestions for how the model could be better adapted to creative writing, in the light of Csikszentmihalyi's model of the creative process above. This is thus a development of a synthesized model of the creative writing process.

Flower and Hayes maintain that the different writing processes in a cognitive process model can function as a writer's tool kit, without constraints as to what order the writer needs to use these tools. For instance, generating ideas may require evaluation, and evaluation may force the writer to think up new ideas' (1983, 376). The power of such a hierarchical process that allows for many embedded sub-processes is its flexibility. It allows us to think of the writing process not in terms of a linear sequence of individual stages but as a thinking process that involves multiple embedding and recursion of subprocesses. They point out that an author may not be fully conscious of

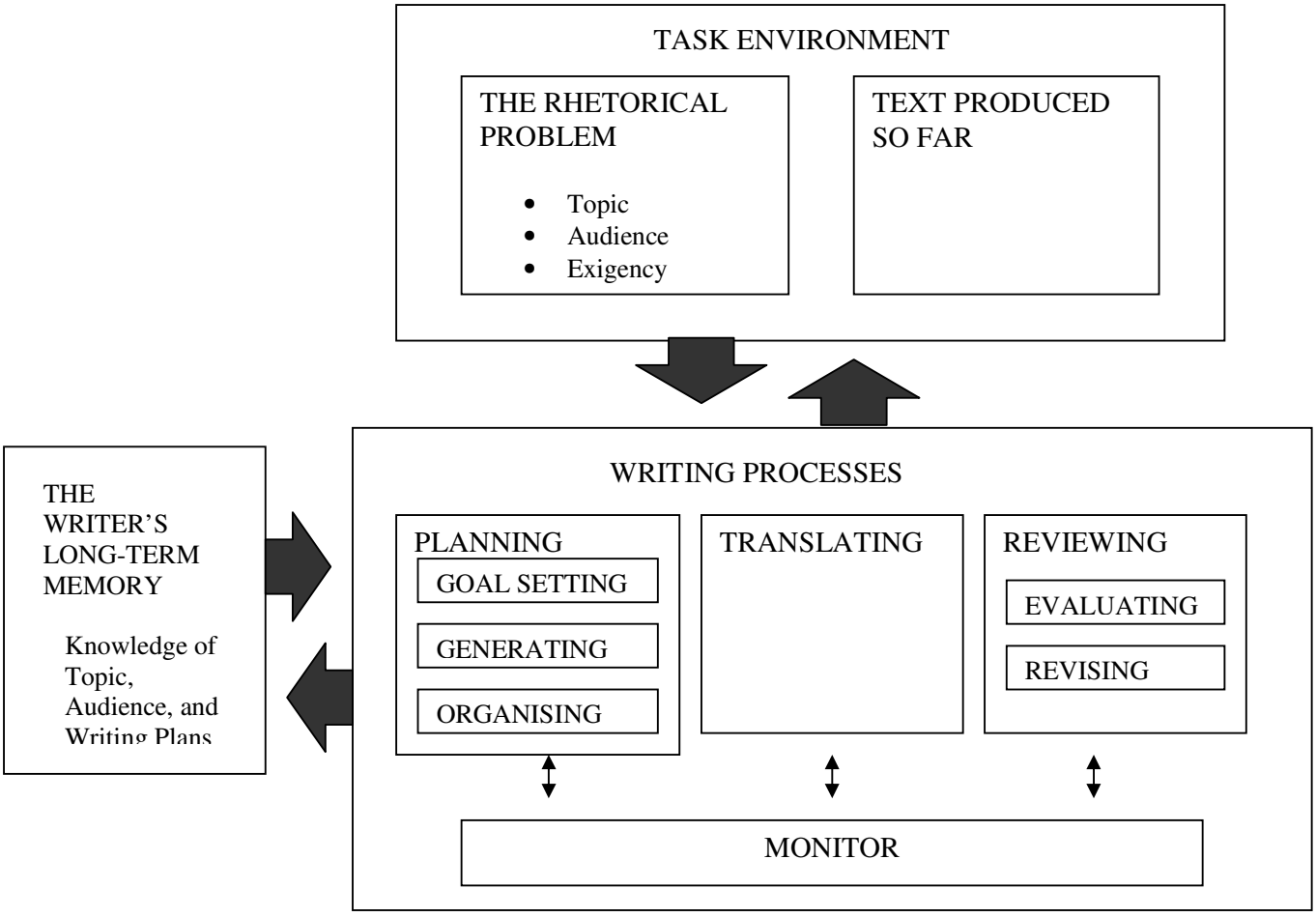
this embedding, however (1981: 376). When Berkenkotter studied him, Donald Murray was surprised by the extent of the recursion of subprocesses and their embeddedness, noting that much of what he thought was a revision phase was in fact planning in the sense of reorganizing ideas and generating new ones to fill perceived gaps between intention and actual text. Csikszentmihalyi's model correlated with Flower and Hayes' in this respect as he too points out that it is essential not to see the phases of the creative process as discrete, exclusive stages but as typically overlapping and recursive (1997: 83).

Prior to the development of the Flower and Hayes model, the dominant paradigm for composing was the stage process model, which describes the composing process 'as a linear series of stages, separated in time, and characterized by the gradual development of the written product' (366-367). An example is the problematic 'pre-write, write, re-write' (Roman, in Flower and Hayes 1981: 367) mentioned in Chapter One. In contrast to stage models, a cognitive process theory of writing has as its units of analysis not stages, but mental processes which are not presented in a linear, sequential way but as hierarchical and embedded.

However, Flower and Hayes (1981: 376-377) felt that embeddedness alone did not account for the complexity of the writing process, or the choices writers make as they invoke particular processes or decide they need to move on to a different one. It would also not account for what gives an overall purposeful structure to the act of composing. They were able to use the powerful process of goal-setting to account for this feeling of purposefulness when writing because, as they pointed out in an earlier article on the 'cognition of discovery' (1980: 21) 'writers don't *find* meanings, they *make* them'. This process of making meaning is a problem-solving process, according to Csikszentmihalyi, who posits that the start of any creative process is the emergence of problems (1997: 83) and there seems to be a strong correlation between what he calls problem setting and what Flower and Hayes call goal setting, as will be elaborated on below.

The cognitive model of the writing process developed by Flower and Hayes is graphically summarised by them in figure 2.1.

*Figure 2.1 The Flower and Hayes (1981) cognitive model of the writing process.*



As can be seen in this diagrammatic representation of their model, the act of writing has been divided into the three major elements, namely the task environment, the writer's long-term memory and the writing process itself. The task environment includes 'all of those things outside the writer's skin, starting with the rhetorical problem or assignment and eventually including the growing text itself' (1981: 69), while the writer's long-term memory is where 'the writer has stored knowledge, not only of the topic, but of the audience and of various writing plans' (369). The writing process itself can be subdivided into the 'basic processes of Planning, Translating and Reviewing, which are under the control of a Monitor' (369).

### 2.1 The task environment[7]

In the task environment, the actual written text enters the process as a new element as composing progresses, because it places constraints upon what the writer can say if he or she is to remain coherent. However, a hallmark of good writers is their ability to juggle the demands of coherence in the growing text with 'conflict between what you know about a topic and what you might actually want to say to a given reader, or between a graceful phrase that completes a sentence and the more awkward point you actually wanted to make' (371).

Flower and Hayes characterize the start of the writing process as an initial response to a rhetorical situation or problem, the audience who prompt the writer to write and the writer's own goal: '[i]nsofar as writing is a rhetorical act, not a mere artifact, writers attempt to "solve" or respond to this rhetorical problem by writing something' (369). According to Flower and Hayes, this is a critical aspect of the writing process and it has repercussions for the entire writing process: 'if a writer's representation of her rhetorical problem is inaccurate or simply underdeveloped, then she is unlikely to "solve" or attend to the missing aspects of the problem" (369). However, their example of a rhetorical problem was a simplistic one of a school assignment describing the topic, audience and implicit role of the writer as a student, and this is echoed in the specific writing tasks given to their research subjects and their implicit role as research subjects. It needs to be ascertained how this question of a rhetorical problem affects professional writers of fiction in a real-life context. However, it is possible in this model that the writer can set or generate goals in response to the task environment or their own inner world, rather than simply have a topic that exists prior to the writing process, which has been given to them by an outsider such as a teacher or researcher.

### 2.2 The writer's long-term memory

After the task environment, Flower and Hayes describe the long-term memory of a writer as having an impact on the writing process. In their model, it is situated in the writer's mind as well as in outside resources such as books, and constitutes 'a storehouse of knowledge about the topic and audience, as well as knowledge of

[7] Subheadings linking the explanation of the model's components to the three 'boxes' on the model, namely 'task environment', 'writing processes' and 'the writer's long-term memory' are intended to help the reader link the explanation of the model to the diagram as this is a very complex explanation. Unfortunately, this is because Flower and Hayes were modelling a complex phenomenon and not all of the terms they uses are self-explanatory, even though they are commonly used by other researchers on writing (cf. Humes and Fitzgerald, referred to in this Chapter).

writing plans and problem representations' (371). They do not refer to this retrieval of long-term memory information as 'research' but it does seem to have some characteristics of research, although research was also something that could come under the writing process of 'generating'. Their protocol analysis involved once-off writings of shorter pieces such as opinion columns for magazines, so it is possible that the kind of research a writer might conduct in a more natural context is not properly accounted for by their model. Flower and Hayes outline two problems with long-term memory: retrieval of useful knowledge, and transformation or reorganization of this knowledge to meet the needs of the reader or audience (371-372).

It could be argued that this concept of the long-term memory implies access to knowledge and resources in what Csikszentmihalyi calls the domain and field. It is clearly an advantage to have had access to good schooling, and to good mentors and coaches. Having 'cultural capital' is a great resource and Csikszentmihalyi says that some of this can come to a child through luck, while other children will 'fight their way to the right schools' or universities to get the training they need against enormous odds (1997: 53-54). Later on, access to the field is as important as access to the domain. There are people who are very knowledgeable but who are hampered by their inability to communicate with important peers (54).

### 2.3 Writing processes

The task environment and the long-term memory all impact on the writing process itself. There are three distinct writing processes, according to this model, namely, planning, translating and reviewing. Planning and reviewing are further divided into sub-processes.

#### 2.3.1 Planning: goal setting, generation and organizing

Planning 'is a thinking process that writers engage in throughout composing' during which, 'writers form an internal representation' of the content of their writing (Humes, 1983: 205-206). It accounts for a large proportion of composing time, 'but writers plan only for brief periods before they start translating their ideas onto paper' (Humes, 1983: 212). It can account for much of the creative work of writing, according to Flower and Hayes (1981: 372-373).

Planning can be a network of ideas represented abstractly by a visual code, image or a single key word rather than as a prose representation (Flower and Hayes, 1981: 372). It includes generating and organizing content, as well as setting goals and deciding on tactics for completion of the writing task (Humes, 1983: 206). These subcategories are sometimes clearly distinct from one another, but at times they appear so inseparable that it is almost impossible to speak of one without the other, an aspect which comes out in Flower and Hayes' discussion as well as in my own attempt at coding and discussing the transcripts from my interviews.

The planning sub-process of generating ideas 'includes retrieving relevant information from long-term memory' (Flower and Hayes 1981: 372). Sometimes this information is so organized and well-developed in memory that it comes out as standard written language, but on other occasions only fragmentary, disconnected, even contradictory thoughts are generated which still have to take shape (372). When

this happens, the ideas in the writer's memory are not adequate to the rhetorical task in question, and the sub-process of organization come into play, helping the writer to make meaning out of his or her ideas. This seems to be an important function of creative thinking and discovery as it is in this process that new concepts are formed and ideas grouped and it is far more than the mere ordering of points (372). 'Strictly textual decisions', such as the ordering of text, important ideas and presentation patterns (372) are a part of the organizing sub-process. However, decisions and plans such as the identification of categories, the search for subordinate ideas to develop the topic, and superordinate ideas that subsume or include the topic, also have an affect on the process of organising ideas at all levels, as these are 'often guided by major goals established during the powerful process of goal-setting' (372). Furthermore, according to Csikszentmihalyi, a broad base of knowledge beyond the boundaries of literature is useful for when a writer has to decide to generate or organize new ideas. Weaving ideas and emotions from disparate domains is one of the ways in which writers demonstrate creativity (1997: 263).

Goal-setting itself is held to be a 'little studied but major aspect of the planning process.' An important point the article makes about writing goals is that they are the creation of the writer:

> Although some well-learned plans and goals may be drawn intact from long-term memory, most of the writer's goals are generated, developed, and revised by the same processes that generate and organize new ideas (Flower and Hayes, 1981: 373).

They further argue that 'developing and refining one's own goals is not limited to a "pre-writing stage" in the composing process, but is intimately bound up with the on-going, moment-to-moment process of composing' (373). Flower and Hayes concluded that 'defining one's own rhetorical problem and setting goals is an important part of "being creative" and can account for some important differences between good and poor writers' (373). This is because discovery and goal-directed thinking are closely interwoven. Writers set goals for themselves to seek the unexpected, to explore their knowledge and experience, to search for fresh insights and to consolidate what they already know. It is 'this search for insight' that 'leads to new, more adequate goals, which in turn guide further writing' (379).

Flower and Hayes posited two main types of goals, namely content goals (which involve the development of the rhetorical problem and everything the writer wants to say to her audience) and writing process goals (which help decide what strategy to employ at any stage in the writing process, as explained in the previous paragraph). However, Berkenkotter was critical of a gap in their observations, namely the development of 'intricate style goals' (1983: 166). This had also struck me as particularly important aspect of writing, and in particular creative writing, namely a concern for the aesthetic effect of a text and the setting of personal criteria for the choosing of words, images and textual structures.

The goal setting, generating and organizing processes are very similar in nature to the emergence of presented or discovered problems in Csikszentmihalyi's model, as mentioned previously. It is noteworthy that Csikszentmihalyi uses the words 'problem' and 'inspiration' interchangeably as it is also frequently goal setting that drives the generation of ideas in Flower and Hayes' model.

When it comes to the content goals of a work, Csikszentmihalyi points out that it is rare for a person to make a creative discovery without any preparation. Insights usually come to the prepared minds of those 'who have thought long and hard about a given set of problematic issues' (1997: 83). This possibly implies the same interaction with the long-term memory and task environment as in the Flower and Hayes' model. In Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) research, there were three typical sources from which problems emerge, namely 'personal experiences, the requirements of the domain, and social pressures' (83) and they are often intertwined with one another (84).

Personal experiences and emotions as the raw materials of inspiration are apparently most clearly evident in the work of humanists such as poets and novelists and this could explain the predominance of activities designed to unlock self knowledge in creative writing textbooks that Wandor complained of[8] (84). Csikszentmihalyi attributes the centrality of a personal motive to stimulate creativity to the fact that the 'lively interest' required to make someone persevere through the hard work of creation are 'rooted in deep feelings, in memorable experiences that need some sort of resolution' (87).

The requirements of the domain form another source of problems as every creative person must respond to the internal logic and patterns of a particular domain and its symbolic system (87). If a creative person wishes to make a contribution to a domain, they have to either conform or rebel against whatever is happening in that domain. Reacting against accepted wisdom and trying to establish relevance are all ways in which a domain might present a problem for a creative person to solve. And yet it is difficult to 'transform a domain unless you first thoroughly understand how it works' (90) and acquire its tools, principles and an awareness of what is happening in this domain (90). So a certain tension between knowing the rules of a domain and being prepared to break them for the sake of creating something better can be a driver of the creative process. In the world of writing, this knowledge of the domain often comes from reading.

The third source of problems discussed is the pressures of the human environment, and here Csikszentmihalyi is referring specifically to the field one works in. Teachers, mentors, institutions, colleagues, students and followers can all have an influence, as can events occurring in one's country or the wider world (90). A social context for problems can stem from classes, conferences, festivals and so forth where others in the field discuss ideas, trends and broader issues being tackled (91). Special concerns can also arise in response to a societal problem such as crime or oppression of a minority group. Csikszentmihalyi maintains that 'while it lasts, creative writing is the next best thing to having a world of one's own in which what's wrong with the "real" world can be set right' (264).

All three of these sources of problems can be the spark that starts off the creative process as they provide 'a sense that there is a puzzle somewhere, or a task to be accomplished'. Thus a problem is characterized as arising potentially from tension that needs resolution, either in one's personal life, symbolic system of the field, or in wider society (95). These problems probably are the driving force behind the

[8] Cf. Chapter One

processes of goal setting and the generating of ideas as well as the organization of ideas and style goals as to how they are expressed.

A difficulty with remembering processes such as goal setting, is that once problems have been solved satisfactorily most, if not all the processes used to reach that solution will be forgotten as they are no longer of use to the writer. Despite this, and the fact that authors interviewed were unlikely to use the terms 'goal setting' or 'problem setting' to describe their activities, an awareness of this process helped in designing questions for this research angled at jogging the memories of what authors desired to achieve, what problems they needed to solve, the source of these problems. On the whole, this proved successful, as subsequent analyses in the remaining chapters of this thesis will demonstrate. This helped build a picture of some aspects of the planning process that might otherwise have remained obscure.

One of the things that Berkenkotter's study makes clear is that it is not possible to study the minutiae of any cognitive process beyond a particular point, no matter how exhaustive such a study might be. As Murray put it, they could not assume that what he said 'reflected all that was taking place. It did reflect what [he] was conscious of doing, and a bit more' (1983: 170) but some aspects remain a mystery. For example, Murray mentions what the researchers called his 'Bathroom epiphanies' which were 'those moments when [he] left the desk and came back with a new insight' (170). This points to a gap in the Flower and Hayes model, namely, the role of incubation in the development of ideas, and an explanation for those moments of inexplicable inspiration that might be called 'epiphanies'. While they speak of writing process goals that lead to mulling over an idea for a while to wait for a realization, and the process of organization helping to develop half-formed ideas creatively into fresh ideas, their model lacks detail on the incubation process, which Csikszentmihalyi called 'the mysterious time' - a time in which 'the creator becomes puzzled by an issue and remembers coming to a sudden insight into the nature of a problem, but does not remember any intermediate conscious mental steps.' (1997: 98). Thus Csikszentmihalyi's theories will be used to elucidate this part of the planning process.

Csikszentmihalyi's respondents unanimously agreed on the importance of allowing problems to 'simmer below the threshold of consciousness for a time'. It was often agreed that during a period of seeming idleness, such as walking, sleeping or showering this vital subconscious incubation would happen (1997: 98-99). Short periods of incubation result in smaller creative shifts in problem solving, while longer periods of incubation tend to bring on greater discoveries and insights, but Csikszentmihalyi maintains that this hypothesis is 'difficult to verify' because as 'it is impossible to determine with precision when the first germs of…great works appeared in the minds of their authors, it is also impossible to know how long the process of incubation lasted (100).

According to Csikszentmihalyi, cognitive theorists believe that ideas deprived of conscious direction, follow simple laws of association and can combine more or less randomly. For example, the German chemist August Kekule had the insight that the benzene molecule might be shaped like a ring after he fell asleep while watching sparks in the fireplace make circles in the air. If he had stayed awake, Kekule would have presumably rejected as ridiculous the thought that there might be a connection between the sparks and the shape of the molecule. But in the subconscious, rationality

could not censor the connection, and so when he woke up he was no longer able to ignore its possibility. According to this perspective, truly irrelevant connections dissolve and disappear from memory, while the ones that are robust survive long enough to emerge eventually into consciousness (101).

The distinction between serial and parallel processing of information may also explain what happens during incubation. In a serial system, a problem must be solved in a sequence, one step at a time. In a parallel system such as in advanced computer software, a problem is broken up into its component steps, the partial computations are carried out simultaneously, and then these are reconstituted into a single final solution. Something similar to parallel processing may be taking place when the elements of a problem are said to be incubating. When we think consciously about an issue, our previous training and the effort to arrive at a solution push our ideas in a linear direction, usually along familiar lines. But intentionality does not work in the subconscious. Free from rational direction, ideas can combine and pursue each other in unexpected ways. Because of this freedom, 'original connections that would at first be rejected by the rational mind have a chance to become established' (102).

An important commonality between the writers in Csikszentmihalyi's study was their emphasis on the 'dialectic between the irrational and the rational aspects of the craft, between passion and discipline' (263). Whether it is described as the 'Freudian unconscious where childhood repressions linger or the Jungian collective where the archetypes of the race dwell, or whether we think of it as a space below the threshold of awareness where previous impressions randomly combine until a striking new connection happens by chance, it is quite clear that all the writers place great stock in the sudden voice that arises in the middle of the night to enjoin: "You have to write this" (263).

An intensely and precisely recalled 'particular moment when some major problem [crystallizes]' in the mind so that a solution becomes 'all but inevitable' and requires only time and hard work to complete (103-104), or what Csikszentmihalyi calls the 'Aha! Moment', is something that not all creative people experience, but which is significant as a potential part of the creative process. Csikszentmihalyi postulates that this kind of flash of insight would occur when 'a subconscious connection between ideas fits so well that it is forced to pop out into awareness like a cork held under water breaking out into the air after it is released.

As the specific subprocesses of incubation and the 'aha' experience which are so characteristic of creative work, are perhaps the least understood and most mysterious aspects of the creative process, it seemed important to try to pinpoint them in some way in the interviews for this research. Questions were thus designed to explore the significance of taking short breaks or longer seemingly inactive time away from the writing process that seem to lead to unexpected discoveries and creative ideas.

### 2.3.2 Translating

After planning, translating is the next part of the writing process described in the Flower and Hayes model. It is characterized as 'the process of putting ideas into visible language' (1981: 373) and can be represented in a variety of symbol systems other than the linguistic, which is why Flower and Hayes (1981: 373) and Humes

(1983) prefer this term to 'transcribe' or 'write'. In other words, translating can involve a writer trying to capture an image, sound, feeling or a movement in written language. The task could involve, for example, 'trying to capture the movement of a deer on ice' or translating 'a meaning, which may be embodied in key words…and organized in a complex network of relationships, into a linear piece of written English' (Flower and Hayes, 1981: 373). Translating could thus perhaps be described as the physical embodiment of the other subprocesses such as writing down ideas generated, or drawing organizational diagrams, or making revisions to what has already been written.

An aspect of task environment that could influence this part of the writing process is the tools and equipment used to write with, as these effect ease of writing. Flower and Hayes mention the automation of skills such as spelling and handwriting as having an impact on translation, as if these require too much operational memory, they could slow down and potentially stall the process. This is not likely to be a problem with expert writers at the level of this study, however. What Flower and Hayes, and Berkenkotter and Murray do not mention, and Csikszentmihalyi only briefly touches on, is the importance of the tools of the trade – computers versus writing by hand, for example. As so many 'self help' writing books such as *The Sound of Paper* by Julia Cameron (2004) and *Dancing Pencils* by Felicity Keats (1999), urge writers to do writing in search of fresh ideas by hand and not on computer, this aspect has also been added to the research questions as forming part of the process of translation. Cameron and Keats does not give particularly clear reasons why one ought to work by hand rather than on computer, it seems to be a part of accessing what they refer to as creative 'right-brain' thinking (Keats, 1999:21-32; Cameron, 2004: 9-10).

### 2.3.3 Reviewing: evaluating and revising

The final writing process in the Flower and Hayes model is reviewing. This should not be thought of as something that 'the writer does after a draft is completed' (Murray in Humes, 1983: 210) as it is not the final stage in a linear process. In reality, it occurs physically and cognitively throughout the writing of a work (Sommers in Humes 1983: 210) and can 'interrupt any other processes and occur at any time in the act of writing' (Flower and Hayes, 1981: 374) 'Revising…is…(1) changing the meaning of the text in response to a realization that the original intended meaning is somehow faulty or false or weak…..(2) adding or substituting meaning to clarify the originally intended meaning or to follow more closely the intended form or genre of the text…. (3) making grammatical sentences more readable by deleting, reordering and restating…., as well as (4) correcting errors of diction, transcription and syntax that nearly obscure intended meaning or that are otherwise unacceptable' (Nold in Humes, 1983: 210). The analysis of 'famous author's revision efforts support the notion that good writing entails considerable revision' (Hildick in Fitzgerald, 1987: 481).

In the Flower and Hayes model of the writing process, reviewing relies on the subprocesses of evaluating and revising. It can be a 'conscious process in which writers choose to read what they have written either as a springboard to further translating or with an eye to systematically revising the text (374). Revision is significant not only as a 'tidying up' process, but because writers 'use revision to rework thoughts and ideas' and 'enables writers to muddle through and organize what

they know in order to find a line of argument, to learn anew, and to discover what was not known before…' Fitzgerald (1987: 481). In other words, writing is heuristic; one does not simply think, then, as the idiom puts it 'get one's thoughts on paper', the writing process itself is a thinking process.

Deliberate reviewing often leads to fresh cycles of the planning and translating processes but it can also be manifested as 'unplanned action triggered by an evaluation of either the text or one's own planning (that is, people revise written as well as unwritten thoughts or statements)' (Flower and Hayes, 1981: 374). For example, a person could rework a sentence that they have just typed onto their computer or evaluate a sentence before they type it out and decide to alter or omit it before it has even been written down. On another level, Berkenkotter explicitly endorses Flower and Hayes' principle of global revisions, that 'in the act of composing, writers move back and forth between planning, translating (putting thoughts into words) and reviewing their work. And as they do, they frequently "discover" major rhetorical goals' (1983: 163).

In reviewing, as for the planning process, knowledge of the domain garnered from reading good quality texts can be of enormous benefit. For writers to be able to judge their writing as 'successful or high in quality….identification of discrepancies most likely requires knowledge of characteristics of 'good" writing, ability to recall and represent relevant knowledge, and ability to write/read one's own writing from a reader's perspective' (Bartlett, 1982, in Fitzgerald, 1987: 484). Thus reviewing is essential. The writer needs to be able to draw on 'a huge repertoire of words, expressions, and images used by previous writers' in order to select the ones best suited to the present task, and has to decide to generate new words if needed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998: 263).

The part of Csikszentmihalyi's' model that perhaps corresponds most closely to the reviewing process is his '99% perspiration'. Listening to the unconscious mind is not enough to make good writing: 'The real work begins when the emotion or idea that sprang from the uncharted regions of the psyche is held up to the light of reason, there to be named, classified, puzzled over, and related to other emotions and ideas' (263). Insights have to be checked carefully 'to see if the connections genuinely make sense.…Most lovely insights never go any farther, because under the cold light of reason fatal flaws appear' (264).

As a work evolves, it is constantly 'monitored by the critical eye of the writer' (263) and this is a difficult process because it requires that the mind stay 'focused on two contradictory goals: not to miss the message whispered by the unconscious and at the same time force it into a suitable form'. The first process depends on openness, while the second requires critical judgment (263-264). Writers block results, according to Csikszentmihalyi, if these two processes 'are not kept in constantly shifting balance' (264) and this calls for such tremendous concentration and becomes so exhausting that writers can often only work for a few hours before they have to shift focus to something outside of the work, often something mundane. This then is another important reason (apart from incubation) for taking breaks to be explored as an integral part of the writing process in this research.

After the initial evaluation of a new idea, 'if everything checks out, the slow and often routine work of elaboration begins' (264). There are apparently four main conditions that are important during this stage of the process. First of all, one must keep an open mind and be flexible, as one pays attention to the developing work, to notice when new ideas, problems and insights arise out of the interaction with the medium. Next, one must pay attention to one's goals and feelings, to know whether the work is progressing as intended. The third condition is to keep in touch with domain knowledge, to use the most effective techniques and the fullest information as one proceeds. And finally, especially in the later stages of the process, it is important to listen to colleagues in the field. By interacting with others involved with similar problems, it is possible to correct a line of solution that is going in the wrong direction, to refine and focus one's ideas, and to find the most convincing mode of presenting them, the one that has the best chance of being accepted' (104-105). In the writing world, this can mean, for example, having a publisher review a draft of a text, or a discussion at a writing festival with other authors who write in a similar genre.

While the first three conditions correlate well to Flower and Hayes' modeling of the writing process, the last one, namely interaction with other people in the field is notably missing from their model. As with other gaps in the model, this is probably due to their artificial laboratory conditions for writing, which excluded the possibility of interaction with peers, mentors or others trusted with involvement in the writing process, in particular reviewing.

### 2.3.4 The monitor

A problematic aspect of the writing process in the Flower and Hayes model is the Monitor, which is characterized as acting as an 'executive…writing strategist which determines when the writer moves from one process to the next'. For example, it determines how long a writer continues generating ideas before actually starting to write (1981: 374). This wording is troublesome as they characterize the monitor as a noun – even a 'person' – the 'writing strategist' in a model describing cognitive processes which are clearly all verbs. It would perhaps be clearer to speak of 'the monitoring process' and avoid this quasi personification of this aspect of writing. Flower and Hayes' studies led them to believe that these choices about when to move between different processes are governed by the writer's goals, on the one hand, and by 'individual writing habits or styles' on the other. As an example of the latter, they mention that 'writers appear to range from people who try to move to polished prose as quickly as possible to people who…plan the entire discourse in detail before writing a word' (374). According to research by Bereiter and Scardamalia (in Flower and Hayes 1981: 374), a child' s writing difficulties often lie with not having this monitoring process which encourages sustained generation of ideas before switching to other processes. However, I feel this 'monitor' could be accounted for adequately as part of the goal setting processes that fall under the process of planning and determine goals for content, writing processes and style, and it is not clear from Flower and Hayes' discussion how it stands apart as an individual entity or process. I believe this makes sense logically as the subprocesses are so recursive (as Flower and Hayes pointed out themselves) that separating out the 'monitor' as a distinct element seemed unnecessary in addition to the problematic personification in their terminology.

This instinct was borne out in the way it proved difficult to devise questions that allowed for a clear distinction between the monitoring process and goal setting, and so there is no attempt to make this distinction in discussions of the transcripts in subsequent chapters.

### 2.4 Other influences on the writing process: situational variables, knowledge of and access to the domain and field, and the influence of personality

Both Berkenkotter and Murray (1983) agreed that the writing environment and conditions in which a writing task has to be completed, including affective considerations such as distractions caused by problems at work or at home, ought to receive more attention. Berkenkotter adopts Faigley and Witte's term 'situational variables' to describe these aspects and agrees with their assertion that these variables are so important 'that writing skill might be defined as the ability to respond to them' (1983: 160). Donald Murray states that 'much more research has to be done into those conditions, internal and external, that make effective writing possible or impossible' (1983: 171).

Berkenkotter and Murray concluded that situational variables were so important partly through a failed attempt to complete a Flower and Hayes-style laboratory conditions protocol analysis of Murray writing. In Berkenkotter's words, under these unnatural circumstances, with an artificial topic and an artificial time frame,[9] 'Murray clutched[10], producing two lines of text' (1983: 159) which were humorous but inappropriate to the task. Murray's sensitivity to audience meant that writing for an artificial audience he could not imagine stalled his writing, while his own lack of personal background with regard to the topic also led to a block in his writing flow (159-160). Therefore, Berkenkotter's study confirmed the weakness in Flower and Hayes' (1981) study, namely that the way in which a writer functions when he or she is writing in a familiar setting will be considerably different from how that same writer would function 'in an unfamiliar setting, given an unfamiliar task, and constrained by a time period over which he or she has no control' and the idiosyncrasies of individual writers are not taken into account (1983: 167). She also proved how much audience is important to Murray from the very beginning of a writing task, and not only at the end as he had thought.

Csikszentmihalyi also mentions these situational variables in his study of creative individuals, developing a hypothesis on physical environments and personal relationships that could enhance or detract from the writing process. In addition to motivation and access to the domain and field, Csikszentmihalyi names the avoidance of distractions in order to immerse oneself in the creative process as a critical factor. Noises, health, family or financial problems can pull the attention away from the work in hand (1997: 120). Many of Csikzentmihalyi's respondents were grateful to spouses 'for providing a buffer' from these breaks in concentration on their work (12) and he

[9] This situation was reminiscent of a school essay writing exam setting.

[10] In other words, he 'stalled' or was unable to write.

concludes that personal relationships are important to a creative individual's ability to carry out their working process successfully.

Furthermore, while he concedes that many extraordinarily creative individuals have worked happily even in dismal surroundings, Csikszentmihalyi believes that 'the spatiotemporal context in which creative persons live has consequences that often go unnoticed' (127). For one, creative people have often gravitated towards places which are centers of activity in their domain and field so that their work has a greater chance of succeeding, such as particular cities famous for the arts or their publishing industry (127). In addition, places of natural beauty are often sought out for the anticipated inspirational effect this might have on creative work (127). Regardless of circumstances and restraints, however, Csikszentmihalyi found that creative people by and large 'manage to give their surroundings a personal pattern that echoes the rhythm of their thoughts and habits of action. Within this environment of their own making, they can forget the rest of the world and concentrate on pursuing the Muse' (127-128).

A space that provides solitude and a good working environment in a setting which is not repressive or conservative but rather rich in varied ideas, novelties and people could be advantageous to the creative process (129-130). Apparently working at universities can curtail creativity if the university in question is too committed to preserving knowledge rather than stimulating creativity. However, some participants in his study declared that it was a wonderful environment for creative people because of the stimulation of colleagues in particular, who one poet described as generally being 'quirky, imaginative, idiosyncratic, lively and controversial' (130).

While there is not necessarily a direct causal effect, he concluded that the prepared mind was 'more likely to find new connections among ideas, new perspectives on issues' and so forth in beautiful settings (136) or 'stimulating, serene majestic views imbued with natural and historical suggestions' (137). Taking walks in beautiful surroundings is apparently even better than sitting and staring at them (137) and Csikszentmihalyi's research also indicated that people reported their highest levels of creativity during an average day while walking, driving or swimming, which he explains as semi-automatic activities which take up some attention while leaving the mind mostly 'free to make connections among ideas below the threshold of conscious intentionality' (138). In other words, it seems that sometimes not devoting full attention to a problem but also not being too distracted from it by worries and outside influences might be conducive to creative thought and problem solving (138). Complex and novel sensory experiences, including visual stimulus and sound, such as birdsong or flowing water may, if they do not require a 'full investment of attention' provide a stimulus to new thinking. This could be an important insight into how a part of the incubation process works, as discussed further below.

While inspiration and insight might be catalyzed by novel or beautiful surroundings, other phases of the creative process such as preparation for the inspiration and elaboration of it appear to benefit more from 'familiar, comfortable settings' (139). While his respondents reported a variety of preferences, Csikszentmihalyi identified a common factor, which was that it is important to have 'a special space tailor-made to one's own needs, where one feels comfortable and in control' (140). Csikszentmihalyi maintains that all people transform houses into homes by filling them with objects

that have meaning and reflect particular interests and personalities. He calls this a 'supportive symbolic ecology' and says that it allows us to 'feel safe, drop our defenses, and go on with the tasks of life' (142). While once again he does not propose a direct causal relationship between the environment and creativity, he felt that a home that reflected one's uniqueness might very possibly enhance the likelihood of one's acting out that uniqueness in a creative process.

A sense of ritual, or what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'patterning activities' is also apparently important to the creative process, as these give order and meaning to a person's daily life. Some examples he gives are regular activities such as playing the piano, gardening, reading, cooking and walking to help get the mind 'off a linear track' (144). Part of this was that each creative person created a schedule dictated by their own choice and preference far more than by external routines or chance. Respondents in his study spoke of the importance of a rhythm they impose on their time, involving periods of work and rest, solitude and collegiality or interaction with family (144). Apparently, 'most creative individuals find out early what their best rhythms are for sleeping, eating and working and abide by them even when it is tempting to do otherwise. This frees the mind to allow for intense concentration and in a sense makes them 'master of their own time' and not overly concerned with what is socially expected of them (145).

Csikszentmihalyi concluded that during preparation and 'gathering elements out of which the problem is going to emerge' an 'ordered, familiar environment is a good idea. However, at the next stage, when thoughts about the problem 'incubate below the level of awareness; the most helpful environment might be one in which there is the distraction of novel stimuli or magnificent views. This could allow the subconscious to make connections that are unlikely if the problem is 'pursued with the linear logic learned from experience'. After unexpected insights have occurred, a more familiar environment is once more likely to be conducive to the efficient exposition of the insights gained (145-146). However, what matters most is *shaping* ones own environment to bring it into harmony with the rhythms of one's own personal creative process and proclivities.

Thus, while a writer could potentially write anywhere on any kind of paper, with any kind of pencil or pen or work on any kind of typewriter or computer, I was curious about my participants' choices of writing material and other 'situational variables' (Berkenkotter) that might or might not affect the writing process. Everyone interested in writing has heard anecdotes of the eccentricities of one or another famous author's transcription methods and I am no exception, having heard of one author who would dictate, like Murray, to a typist, but could only do this if she was unable to see the typist at all and the room had to be arranged so that she always had the typist at her back. Roald Dahl wrote in a tiny hut in the garden into which no one was allowed and always sharpened six brand new pencils at the start of each composing session, as this was what he had worked out was what he needed to be able to write non stop for each of the two hour sessions that he worked each day (The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre, 2007). Being invited by Orford to see her writing studio, and getting a glimpse of her work in progress was thus an unexpected windfall for my research.

What became clear even while compiling an interview schedule was that the various situational variables, internal and external, affective and physical, mentioned by

Berkenkotter and Murray and by Csikszentmihalyi might need further categorization. As will be seen in Chapters Three to Six, variables such as knowledge of and access to the domain and field (discussed in Chapter One), and affective variables such as the personal relationships are possible to discuss as more or less distinct influences on the creative writing process. Taking breaks is less easy to separate out as this emerged as something that needs further distinction. As discussed in Chapter Seven, there were breaks that formed part of the incubation of ideas and those that served other functions. Breaks are thus discussed as a distinct subprocess but at times there is some overlap between this and generation of ideas, for example. It proved very difficult to separate out the process of translation from the physical environment(s) and the tools required for carrying out this subprocess so these have been discussed under one subheading. As with all the other categories the creative writing process has been divided into, these divisions are artificial abstractions and there is naturally an overlap between subprocesses throughout the discussions of the interviews in the chapters that follow.

The question of the impact of individual personality on the creative writing process is also raised in the author chapters, though not as a distinct category as it permeates all aspects of the process. Csikszentmihalyi points out that creative people in his research appear to 'experience even the most focused immersion in extremely difficult tasks as a lark, an exhilarating and playful adventure' (106) so this creative process, while arduous and complex, can be deeply satisfying 'for its own sake' and can lead to an immense enrichment of the experience of living (106). While a detailed discussion of the personality of creative people that is covered by Csikszentmihalyi and others such as Kaufman (2002) goes beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to mention the critical aspect of motivation as a driver of the desire to write and the ability to sustain longer periods of writing, as well as the strategies individual writers adopt in order to cope with potentially debilitating fatigue, emotional strain or boredom. Creativity researcher, Kaufman (2002: 29) maintains that 'motivation is a key concept for understanding the creative process' and that 'the issue of motivation is especially applicable to creative writers.' According to Csikszentmihalyi, 'The most important quality creative people possess' is 'the ability to enjoy the process of creation for its own sake' rather than for the sake of fame or fortune (1997: 75). This is supported by Kaufman's conclusion that 'intrinsic motivation yields a more creative product' than extrinsic motivation (2002: 29).

While Csikszentmihalyi is interested in broader philosophical and psychological questions such as why humans are interested in literature (1997: 238) he also looks into some of the specifics by conducting 'a brief analysis of the goals and working methods' of the writers in his study (237). When examining the reasons why these people felt driven to write, he concludes that while they all inherently love to play with words and language, they are also deeply serious about their domain and feel that being a writer is a critical part of their identity. He felt that they 'are all involved in creating imaginary worlds that are as necessary for them as the physical world they inhabit' (239) and describes the writing process as the creation of 'symbolic refuges' from reality for writers. Despite these similarities among writers, he claims that their individual 'goals and approaches' are all very different, and while '[s]ome feel that they have a central message they want to convey, others tend to react more to experience; some emphasize tradition, others spontaneity' (240).

**2.5 Summary**

While there are numerous problems with empirical research on a complex cognitive process such as creative writing, as the discussion of research methods at the start of this chapter has shown, writing researcher Ann Humes (1983: 214) claims that it is possible 'to note patterns that have credibility because they appear consistently across studies…. [O]nly by using a variety of techniques can researchers explore the various facets of this complex behaviour.'

For this reason, elements from the research discussed in this chapter were combined to form the basis of semi-structured interviews with successful publishing creative writers in South Africa. The interview questions were based on the various writing processes in the Flower and Hayes model discussed in this chapter, supplemented by the creative process model of Csikszentmihalyi and the results of Berkenkotter and Murray's naturalistic study. However, the terms used in these models were not always specifically used in questions as it was felt that the participants were not likely to be aware of their meaning in this context. Questions on translating in particular were divided into questions on technicalities such as handwriting versus typing, materials used, and so forth, as the word 'translating' has a more common usage that could confuse the participants or lead to long explanations that would interrupt the flow of the interview.

While the writing process was the focus of the interviews rather than the content of specific works by each author, some leads from the authors' work were used to help draw the author out. In the light of Csikszentmihalyi's work and the importance of the topics and problems underlying creative work to the creators themselves, a detachment from the products of the writing process would also not make sense. Thus an attempt was made to read a range of each participating author's fiction and to insert a few examples from these texts into the questions in the hope that this might be stimulating to the discussion, without leading the conversation too much into a discussion of content rather than process. This also meant that the author could anticipate that I had read their books and knew what they were about and prevented time-consuming explanations on their part where they had to elaborate on the content of a book I had not read.

Some biographical material and other available interviews with each author were also studied before each interview to avoid the necessity of the participant having to give any part of their life story that they did not feel was particularly relevant to their writing process. This background knowledge was very valuable in keeping the interviews cordial and open and while it did mean that each interview questionnaire was slightly different, this enhanced rather than detracted from the study. In each of the four chapters that follows, a particular author is discussed, and the texts read in preparation for the interview are listed. This background reading was also invaluable when the interview transcripts were analyzed and discussed.

The discussions of the transcripts are divided into subheadings reflecting the modeling of the creative writing process discussed in this chapter and is intended to facilitate comparison across authors. While these subheadings are extremely useful in terms of categorization and analysis of the interview transcripts, they are by no means intended to be absolute divisions as the models and theories in this chapter

demonstrated, and these interviews upheld, the writing process is recursive and all the subprocesses and aspects of the environment are interlinked and can affect more than one area simultaneously. The transcripts were therefore coded and information was divided in ways that seemed clearest and most useful to understanding the writing process of each author rather than in some rigid, clearly delineated way that might obscure the true nature of the process.

The discussion of the interview is divided into two parts: the writing process itself and factors that impact on the writing process, such as the 'situational variables' mentioned by Berkenkotter and Murray and discussed in Csikzentmihalyi's work, which include the impact of the personal environment created by family, colleagues and others on the writer's process and the physical environment in which writing takes place.

At the start of the interview, each participant was requested to give a brief summary of their writing process from start to finish, providing them with the opportunity to express their own conception of this before being pressed for details. As this was a very open-ended question, sometimes the answers were very long, sometimes they were more succinct, but this was an attempt to privilege the author's conception of the writing process at the start of the interview over any theoretical one imposed through the other questions. Throughout the analysis, the authors' own words are privileged wherever space allows, as part of the value of having primary source material is in getting the fresh perspective of individual viewpoints.

In the chapters that follow, the rationale for the selection of each author is supported by a brief publishing history and biography. Further details on the author's background and books are so integral to the discussion of their working process that these four chapters would become repetitive if the introductions to the authors were too extensive. It is hoped that the reader will gain ample insight into the writer's work and life from the analysis of the transcripts. In the final chapter, common threads and striking differences between the four authors are discussed.

A brief note on style seems appropriate at this juncture. The contemporary nature of this study means that there is very little formally published material on these authors and a predominance of references available on the Internet. There is very rarely any indication of an author or editor responsible for the information or a date of publication on the Internet, which makes referencing in the Harvard system cumbersome at times. Where lengthy references might interrupt the flow of the writing footnotes have been preferred to parenthetical references. References to the interview transcript have been referenced with page numbers only. In addition, it was found that the use of the formal pronoun 'one' became awkward when extensive use of the author's own words is used in the discussion of the transcript, because the authors naturally did not employ this more formal usage in the interviews. To avoid the stylistic gymnastics required to accurately quote while changing pronouns such as 'you' to 'one' when the meaning was clear, the use of 'one' has been mostly avoided in the following chapters except where it provides particular clarity.

The chapters follow the order in which the interviews occurred, so Margie Orford is followed by Imraan Coovadia, Lesley Beake and finally John van de Ruit. The

interviews took place over four months, from the first interview in March 2009 to the fourth in June 2009.

# Chapter Three: Margie Orford
# South Sea archipelago exploration[11]

*'Writing soothes stomach knots' or so my agent tells me…*

*I take a pen and clutch*
*It hoping that the fear*
*Will go*
*It won't. I know that.*

*Yet still I take the pen and*
*run it across the supine*
*pages, watching me*
*Blankly. Waiting*

*For thoughts to imprint*
*Themselves. Memorable.*
*Contained. Complete.*
*So I ask*

*My pen to take upon it*
*the displaced task*
*That I signed up for: Fill*
*these pages with*

*Desire love grief and*
*the invisible sound of*
*black hair tumbling*
*over a child's plump cheek.'*

(Orford, 2008c)[12]

## 3.1 Author background and publishing history

Orford fulfils the criteria for inclusion in this study because she is a South African and has published three best-selling novels, *Like clockwork* (2006, translated into five languages), *Blood rose* (2007), and *Daddy's girl* (2009)[13] long listed for the 2010

[11] The title is derived from Orford's metaphor for the writing process, described under 3.2.1

[12] This poem is taken from Orford's blog. She composed it while writing the novel, *Daddy's girl*, about a child who is kidnapped by gangsters.

[13] At the time of Orford's interview, she was completing the final edit on this book, but it was published on 9 September 2009 and made available in South Africa on 15 September 2009, so the chapter was revised after reading this novel.

Sunday Times Literary Award for Fiction (Smith, 2010). Her novels are based in South Africa and deal with violent crime against women and children, in which the perpetrators are brought to book by Dr Clare Hart, an investigating 'journalist and part time police profiler'[14]. In addition, Orford has an 'impressive record in investigative journalism' (Pike, 2008) and was a 2003 Mondi Finalist for a story in *Marie Claire* magazine on the trafficking of women for the sex industry in South Africa (Orford, 2006: 282).

Orford was born in London and raised in Namibia and South Africa, and now writes full time in Cape Town. She wrote for *Varsity*, the campus newspaper of the University of Cape Town as a student. Aged 20, she was detained and interrogated by security police during the State of Emergency and wrote her final exams in Pollsmoor prison. She then traveled widely before studying further under literary Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee[15]. After this, she spent ten years working as a commissioning editor for a publishing company in Namibia before teaching publishing and literary theory at the University of Namibia.

Her non-fiction books include *Fabulously forty and beyond: Coming into your power and embracing change* (co-authored with Karin Schimke) and *Climate change and the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism: Stories from the developing world* (co-authored with Stefan Raubenheimer). Her children's and adolescent writing include story books and readers. As editor, she helped produce books such as *Fifteen men: Images and words from behind bars* (2008) in which she presents texts from her writing workshops for the inmates of the Groot Drankenstein prison. She says in her introduction to this book: 'Writing demands that one go to the dark places of the mind and face them' (Orford, 2008d: 13). It appears there is very little she is not prepared to take on in her diverse writing career.

### 3.2 Discussion of interview

In preparation for Orford's interview, her two novels, *Like clockwork* (2006) and *Blood rose* (2007) were read, as well as published interviews with her in the press and biographical information available on the internet.

Orford invited me to her home in Cape Town, saying that this is 'part of the process in a way, to see where someone works' (2009b). The interview was conducted on 23 March 2009 and the transcription is attached as addendum D.

[14] Description of Clare from the back cover of *Like clockwork* (Orford, 2006).

[15] University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2009 and Pike, 2008

### 3.2.1 The author's conception of the writing process

The first point Orford made was that her writing process is very methodical and that all the books she has written, both fiction and non-fiction, have followed the same process (1)[16].

In her description of her overall writing process (1-2), Orford says she is first 'given and idea – just a kernel of something' that usually centres on 'an emotional or ethical problem or interaction' between two people. This is 'lodged' in her mind and she will start making notes, often a long time before she begins a particular book in earnest. Thus at the time of the interview she had 'just finished one book, but the [next] book is already quite far down its conceptual development'. She nurtures this development by free writing in the notebooks she keeps with her all the time so she can note ideas 'as things come to [her]' and will 'just let it build until [she] gets to the point where [she feels] it's ready to start going.' She avoids censoring material that is developed in this way, saying that she tries 'to keep the writing process completely separate from the editing process' (1-2). The notes she writes can be completely fragmented or whole chapters and scenes and she says these 'circle out' from the original idea.

She uses the extended metaphor of exploring an archipelago, where in the beginning she will just have many 'little atolls' including 'dramatic or emotional moments which are key in the text' and then she writes 'from one atoll to the next' [17]. Sometimes she feels 'like those South Sea explorers, the Maoris, just going off and not knowing if there's another island that [the writing is] going to get to' (1-2). This would be like getting lost in the Pacific, 'and then you've had it.' It is notable that she uses metaphorical language to describe her process, rather than a more linear, sequential description, something that was to prove true for all four authors at various points in their descriptions of the writing process.

Apparently, the 'very first thing' she writes is the end of the book because the subject matter she writes about 'is so violent and so bleak that [she needs] to know that [she is] writing towards a point of connection again at the end.' This is likened to having her 'last island mapped out' and she says it 'also gives attention' or focus to a book because 'you have to get to that point' and it also helps her to know where she is going and 'know how it will resolve emotionally.' This does not mean that she has 'worked out where all the bullets come from and who does what' when she starts a book, but she has 'worked out that feeling of…not a *happy* ending, but a … hopefully ending – there's some light' (2).

Slowly, she starts writing 'back and forth, back and forth to build the connections, build the narrative' between these islands and says that here the 'initial question' or

[16] For the remainder of the chapter, all references to the interview transcript, whether paraphrased or directly quoted, are given as page numbers in brackets. Internet sources continue to be footnoted as mentioned in chapter 2, when necessary.

[17] Here she used her hands to show separate compartments and the movement from one to the other. The metaphor came with confidence and her hand movements matched this, as if she had her writing process well mapped in her own mind.

idea that she has had 'has to be very strong' in order to 'sustain a whole year of concentrating.' Questions that are not strong enough peter out in the early stages of writing. She then starts to structure the narrative around time – how long the plot will take to develop. She has to think a lot about 'the timing of things and…the emotional connections between people.' This is like building a web that connects the islands so that the reader 'would be able to pass from one to the next and be shepherded along.'

Perhaps what she has hit upon in her South Seas archipelago metaphor is the complexity of a process that involves highly developed reasoning and logical, methodical processes but which also involves the kind of intuition and sensitivity to the world of the subconscious that might compare to a finely tuned sensory awareness of something as difficult to interpret and predict as the open sea.

### 3.2.2 Planning

#### 3.2.2.1 Goal setting and the rhetorical problem

Orford's goal-setting process has three tiers similar to those described in Chapter Two: first, the content goals that provide the sense of purpose that drives her writing fiction and define her driving rhetorical problems, specifically those revolving around crime fiction. Her choices for main characters and settings also come under this heading. Next she has writing process goals, where she has a methodical approach that helps contain her writing within the boundaries of time and circumstance, and lastly she has her style goals, which influence everything from sentence structure to word choice, the use of imagery and the painstaking revision process that pares her writing down to the cleanly structured prose she finally presents to the world. In this way the goal setting process drives all the other processes

A separation of these goals is a mental construct for speaking about them in a way that might facilitate a clearer understanding of the process. It helps to recall that one of the tenets of Flower and Hayes' cognitive process theory of writing is that any one of the thinking processes orchestrated during composing can be embedded within any other in a hierarchical organisation (1981: 366). An illustration could be that setting style goals is a thinking process embedded within the higher order process of setting goals for her writing overall, which could be described as expressing an emotional truth about violent crime against women and children in Southern Africa. She describes how she came to write crime fiction from her background as an investigative journalist: 'as a journalist you can only list the facts – information and statistics – you never get to that emotional truth – to show the intimate space between two people where one has power and one does not' (Orford, 2009d). Fiction, and the novel in particular, is Orford's choice of medium partly because it is able to fulfill this goal of telling an 'emotional truth', often through characters' perspectives, words and actions as discussed further under generation of ideas.

This is reinforced by a description of the heroine, Clare Hart, by her lover in Orford's second novel, *Blood rose* (2007: 12):

> Putting the world to rights, that's what her investigative work was about, her beliefs giving her the courage to go where there were no nets to catch her if she fell. It fitted with her profiling work, her conviction that she could find the source of evil and eliminate it.

There is a sense in her books that she is trying to get to an understanding of evil in society, without an idea that it can be easily eliminated, but perhaps with an encouragement to women and young people in particular to empower and protect themselves from it. In *Like clockwork*, the reader is presented with a racy thriller on the surface, but there is a lesson to be learnt from the frustration of police at the late reporting of missing children by their parents. While it never comes across as a moral tale, the girl who survives does so mainly because she is physically and psychologically robust and her parents call the police immediately they suspect she is missing.

In *Blood rose*, Orford tackles the problem that it is hard for many people to make themselves care about missing teenage boys who live on the streets, admitting that she finds it hard to care for them herself. However, caring about the fate of the murdered youths in the Namibian town of Walvis Bay leads to the uncovering of a sinister plot linked to Apartheid times and we are reminded of both common humanity and the fact that crime, especially violent crime, in any society affects everyone. One cannot turn a blind eye because the victim is not someone one can easily relate to. Orford's heroine helps to link the boys' deaths to the dark past of officially sanctioned violence under Apartheid as well as in modern 'corrupt, brutal states' (Orford, 2008b).

Principally, her content goals are driven by a desire to comprehend 'What drives people to torture, to kill? [She wants to] understand it, not just worry in the middle of the night' (Orford in Pike, 2008). At the *Words on Water* festival (September 2009), she described her writing as her way of facing the *tokoloshe* under the bed, recounting how she came back to live in South Africa after a long time abroad and was terrified by the extent of the violent crime in the country, which she took personally.

Moving from content to writing process goals, Orford says she deliberately keeps the free writing process separate from the reviewing and editing process (1). This is because free writing is used for the critical creative process of generating ideas and needs to come from a different state of mind than reviewing and editing, which are more cerebral and require a critical eye for detail. This is supported by Csikszentmihalyi's research, where the creative process was shown to require creative generation and critical reviewing in different states of mind. These two aspects of her writing process are further discussed under the processes of 'generating ideas' which follows this section, and 'evaluating and revising' which appears further on in the chapter.

Harder to quantify are the innumerable goals implied by every aspect of the writing process she describes, especially as the three types of goals are so closely overlapping in practice. Orford maintains that when setting out on any writing task, it is essential to 'formulate a question that will sustain your interest…and then to be able to formulate in your mind precisely and clearly how you're going to tackle that' (3), indicating both a writing process goal and a problem setting process that drive content goal setting. Furthermore, you need to 'comprehend [what] you're reading [and] make it your own…by absorbing it and thinking it through and then writing precisely and clearly' (3), highlighting once again a writing process goal, followed this time by a style goal.

This setting of style goals in particular is evident later on when she says that a particular aim with fiction writing is 'a precision of emotion. So you don't want someone to be kind of annoyed or slightly pissed…. You want to know: are they irritated or are they in a murderous rage? … the more experience you get… the more you calibrate the emotion that you are describing' (3).

This goal to be emotionally precise clearly links to her desire to tell 'an emotional truth' as discussed above. She describes how she aims for her style 'to be as spare and precise as possible' (12). This appears to be based on her admiration for other writers with this style, such as her early mentor, J.M. Coetzee, and her experience of teaching at the University of Namibia, which she describes as leading to an epiphany that 'You can present complex ideas to intelligent people and they won't be uncomfortable' and the realization that 'writing "popular fiction" deflates that whole ivory tower thing where language hides what I'm really thinking' (Orford in Dennill, 2008).

When asked about the importance of a love of language to writing, she says she loves 'concrete language where you make the experience of …the senses visible in words' (23) but while she loves imagery she does not like 'flowery language' (23). For this reason, she tries to write so that she can get to a single detail that would make a reader picture the whole thing it represents and discussed the example of the image she was exploring in her poem about *Daddy's girl:*

*the invisible sound of*
*black hair tumbling*
*over a child's plump cheek.*

For her this image 'is something that would move a parent so much. It's just the little detail of her' (23). She engages here in a search for 'imagery that will distil that essence of what makes you respond to a child' (23). It is this element that '[makes] literature come alive' (24).

She uses the alchemic word 'distil' many times in her descriptions of her writing process, so this forms a secondary metaphor after the principle metaphor of navigation and exploration. One describes her mapping out of character and plot, the other her transformation of this material in her choice of words and sentence construction, as if she has a macro and a micro process going on, sometimes simultaneously, on different levels of detail and concentration.

Another goal in this distillation process is 'learning to understand people and learning to merge what people say and my knowledge of context together so you don't hear me showing off what I'd found out about gangs or whatever: a person would emerge who you could relate to' (3). The authenticity of characters is very important to her. She elaborates on this while explaining her choice not to make her heroine, Clare Hart, a 'kickboxing' 'superhero' but rather someone with a more realistic range of capabilities in keeping with her research on 'what really goes on' (11).

For her the most difficult thing to achieve 'is to make the environment in which your characters move seem to have complete dissimilitude - they are just in [this environment] and it must seem natural' (14). This led, in part, to the generation of her particular characters in order to deal with the topics she set out to explore: 'the only

people that did go anywhere were cops and journalists. …in the middle of Khayelitsha in a shebeen, if you say, 'I'm a journalist doing a story,' everyone will …accept that you're there' (14).

She appears to need a level of believability in order to allow the reader to enter into her story world, so this goal is linked to an anticipation of what a reader might need from a character. She makes this link to the reader when she says she tries to 'write in that space where people, ordinary people who would just [do the same thing]…' (21). Consequently, her goal is to help the reader identify with the characters and their choices and mistakes as ordinary human beings, rather than to create larger-than-life characters who are exciting to read about but difficult to relate to.

Places as well as people need to have life breathed into them if they are to draw the reader in, and Orford maintains that the audience she takes into consideration the most is her South African audience, despite her popularity overseas, because her work is to try 'to find ways of reflecting South Africa' (14). Thus both her goals for characterisation and setting circle around a consideration of the needs of her perceived readers.

She sets style goals for her plot structure as well, centring on pace. For her most recent book, *Daddy's girl*, she specifically wanted to create a three day plot which gives 'the reader a feeling of unbearable "not being able to breathe". Because this child is gone. … so I give the reader that feeling of a galloping train right from the start….there's this controlled panic. And you try and function in that situation of panic' (19).

Her writing process incorporates techniques to develop plot structure which are discussed in greater detail under the section on organizing.

A final goal that was singled out is to cover up autobiographical material so that the book does not show off her personal experiences. She states this as an oath as much as merely a goal: 'I used to write a lot as a teenager and I swore that I wouldn't write fiction until I didn't need to write about myself' (10). Naturally, however, much of her material is drawn from her life experiences, fierce beliefs and world view, and this leads into another aspect of Orford's writing process, namely the generation of ideas.

#### 3.2.2.2 Generating

Her initial idea for each new book centers on 'an emotional interaction between two people' 'or 'an ethical problem or interaction' (1) that somehow lodges in her mind (1). New ideas are then generated, circling out from this kernel of an idea, through free-writing longhand in her notebooks. She keeps these notebooks with her all the time in case an unexpected idea emerges.

Her writing day follows a regular routine, getting her family out of the house in the morning, then going up to her writing desk in her studio to work from about eight a.m. till around three or four o'clock in the afternoon. She uses free writing (writing by hand everything that comes to mind regardless of what it is[18]) and says she

[18] This method is recommended by many creative writing manuals, so much so that it has become a truism that this is what one ought to do first (Cf. Cameron 1993 & 1996, Keats 1999, Haarhoff, 1998).

sometimes writes 'I don't know what to say and I don't know what to do' which helps her to 'metamorphose into that parallel space of writing' (6). She will ask questions of herself, in writing until 'an answer comes and… it's very, very, very exhausting sometimes when you're in that creative phase. Often your best writing comes when you feel the worst' (6).

In Orford's writing life, there is no room for waiting for inspiration to strike, and if it ideas do not generate spontaneously, she has ways of stimulating the generation process. While she has not actually read any of Julia Cameron's famous books[19] she has heard of the technique Cameron (1996: 13) maintains is compulsory for all artists (including writers), which is called 'morning pages'. These are three pages of writing which must be done by hand every morning. Cameron claims you can see them as either 'brain drain' or meditation and they are to be written without censorship of any kind, about 'whatever comes into your head' (Cameron, 1996: 13). The purpose of doing the pages is 'process, *not* product' (Cameron, 1996: 14, author's emphasis) and they are not meant to be analysed or turned into art (1996:17). Orford describes how she uses them:

> I find I just get all the top fluff off my brain…. I switch off my phone so I don't have any email connection… and then I just sit and I work. It's being a builder. You arrive on site and there is like cement, a pile of bricks and there's no wall (6).

This analogy of construction crops up in Imraan Coovadia's interview a month later and then in Van de Ruit's: prosaic and practical. And yet it is this hands-on work of the builders who toil daily at their craft that allows the architects' graceful, sky-challenging designs to be realised. Treating her daily writing as a job she has to turn up for on time may not sound very creative but creativity without this discipline seems less likely to happen.

An important point to remember at this stage is that the initial idea for her first book was independent of outside pressure. However, once *Like clockwork* had been published, her agent sold the book along with a package of synopses for future books by Orford. This means that the premise and plot outline for *Blood rose* (2007) and *Daddy's girl* (2009) were decided on long before the books were written (4). This is how one book is being written while another one may already be quite far down its conceptual development (1) in her notebooks. Moreover, her books are linked to one another by plot lines and by their central characters, so generating ideas for one book impacts on the others in the series and it is probably not possible to entirely untangle and separate out the ideas generation process for each book in Orford's case. For that matter, a lot of the material in her books seems to derive directly from some of her experiences in investigative journalism and documentary film making. However, even these sources of ideas can be traced to the author's own core concerns as a woman, a mother, and a scholar as described under content goals above. This echoes Murray's contention that his ideas for a piece of writing could probably be traced back to years of thought on a topic and Csikszentmihalyi's assertion that ideas that emerge for a creative project tend to have been through a preparation phase in the mind first and this could involve what Flower and Hayes referred to as the long term memory.

[19] *The artist's way (1995), The vein of gold* (1996) and *The sound of paper* (2004).

Character drives plot according to Orford and it is choice of character that permits her to write about particular issues in away that fulfils her goal of conveying an emotional truth in a way that that readers can relate to. Orford described the creation of the heroine of her series, Dr Clare Hart, as a spontaneous occurrence: 'Clare was born like Athena, fully clad…a very painful birth, I can tell you that much! I thought, "Who is this woman who has just popped into my psyche – who is this very vulnerable human being with a damaged psyche and this hard shell?"'(Orford, 2009d).

It can be argued that this Aha! moment of a woman popping into her psyche 'fully clad' stems from Orford's interest in female sexuality and violence against women, fueled by her work in investigative journalism. Moreover, she discusses novelist Milan Kundera's inspirational use of sexuality and the 'space of the erotic' as a space that can be defended as a defiance against violence in a troubled society like the Czech Republic under Soviet rule (12). She draws on this when generating her own erotic scenes in which her heroine, forensic profiler Clare Hart, is able to move from horrific images of mutilated corpses and an abusive, exploitative sex industry to a healthy sex life of her own. She explains this as a goal she has, to help women in a particularly sexually violent society like South Africa reclaim personal power through reclaiming their sexuality:

> I'm a patron of Rape Crisis and I was trying to …quantify what the loss of sexual desire and how many orgasms a woman will not have after sex… and all that delight that has no quantifiable monetary value…. If you can maintain that or get that back then you've pushed that thing to the edges , so it's a way of saying that you will keep that little domain of pleasure and freedom for yourself (12).

She describes having aspired to achieve the same truth as Kundera in her own writing about 'how people interact' especially in sexual relationships. She ascribes his talent for erotic writing to 'detachment' and his 'almost [forensic]' style in showing the erotic as a compulsion or desire between two people rather than just in being naked. She also loved his writing as a reaction to the 'flattening of power' that happened under Soviet rule, where the erotic 'was the last space of privacy…that couldn't be controlled.' Thus for Orford, writing about the erotic in a society like South Africa, with endemic violence against women, becomes a rebellious act like Kundera's '[countering] the discipline of public violence' (12).

Notwithstanding this common thread, each book's inspiration and generation of ideas is in many ways a unique process. She had already written an investigative piece on the trafficking of women for the Cape Town sex industry for Marie Clare magazine before writing her first novel on this topic, *Like clockwork.* Her childhood was adventurous, as her family moved from place to place in Namibia, giving her an insight into the desert that would later serve her well in writing *Blood rose* (Pike, 2008) and she did investigative work there for documentaries just as her character, Dr Hart, is supposed to have done. In addition, her work as a commissioning editor involved helping Namibian people to tell their traumatic experiences of the war in Namibia and this informed the interest in violence in the post-independence Namibia that emerges in the intricacies of *Blood rose.*

For an upcoming book, she has approached an artist to create the artwork the main character might paint, as she says she cannot 'write paintings' and has shot a short

film to help her visualize the character. She says she is very influenced by film and feels that characters can be drawn in a more visceral, less cerebral way, through the use of images and different perspectives on the proximity between two people as a representation of the relationship between them[20] (7). She is also experimenting with attending a memoir writing workshop *as* the character for this book, to get into this role more intensively.

Her acute observation and awareness of the body and the psychology of the body in both life and death leads her to a fascination with 'all of that kind of deep stuff which I actually like writing about in my books' (7). She is always on the lookout for 'connections' and explains the start of her writing her next novel, 'The quarry' as simmering along for a long time as a result of this interest:

> I had this idea for *The quarry* which is this new book and that came to me when they were excavating those skeletons down at Prestwich Street[21]. No one would let them do DNA-testing and find out who they were. And I was so pissed off 'cause I thought you can't care about people if they're dead unless you know who they were….And that's when I had the idea of my artist character, Sophie Brown ['s mother], being murdered and her body - this is where the fiction kicks in - her body would sink in amongst these other old skeletons and they find it. The body comes up; all this memory starts to come slowly, slowly (8).

There is a kind of chemistry or even alchemy described here between serendipitous events – her interest in writing a book on 'Intimate Geography' exploring women's bodies and 'trying to map out the geography of a female, the mother's body and the complexity of being a sexual being and the terror of the mother's body for an infant that it can smother you' (8) and her reading of Julia Kristeva[22], that was simmering in the back of her mind. This interest reacted with local news of the excavation of the skeletons and the emerging story which needed developing in terms of somewhere to put the body of her main character's mother so that it would plausibly emerge years later in a way that would help Sophie recall her mother's murder. Even more serendipitous is the fact that Orford's initial interest in the topic for this novel was that she had intended to write a book called 'An intimate geography' before coming across an exhibition with this same title that drew her attention to artist Kathryn Smith as a potential collaborator in her creative process (8).

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[20] This aspect of the spaces between people surfaces a number of times in the interview and was also mentioned by Orford at a talk given at the 2008 Cape Town Book Fair referred to previously in this chapter. It appears to be a critical part of Orford's perception of the writing process and she attributes it to her work with a particularly good camera man on one of her film directing jobs, whose work led to what she describes as an 'epiphany' for her writing (page 7 of transcript).

[21] The excavation and Prestwich street happened in 2003 and 2004. Skeletons of what were believed to be slaves and other 'underclass' citizens were uncovered during excavations for a new building. The debate on what to do about the remains became highly emotive and politicized and forensic anthropologists from UCT were banned from studying the remains to identify more accurately who they might have belonged to (Morris, 2008).

[22] Kristeva, like Orford, writes what could be called detective fiction, which deals with feminist and other philosophical and psychoanalytical issues, reflecting her academic training. (Julia Kristeva, 2009).

'The premise of *Blood rose*' was likewise triggered initially by 'an actual, awful crime that happened [in Namibia] while [Orford] was filming a documentary on fishing quotas. A teenager was sodomised and murdered, then discarded on a school playground' (Orford in Pike, 2008).

Some ideas, on the other hand, arise as solutions to problems in the emerging text. Orford's main character, Dr Clare Hart, has a twin sister who had to be created in order to 'have this one very damaged pure feeling body, which is Constance, and this other one whose like pure mind almost [Clare]' (10). This in turn allows her to 'make the experience of being a woman in a very misogynistic society real' (10).

This is a function of her main character needing to be cerebral, physically tough and fearless, but still human and believable. The 'limitation of the body' (11) of her female character led in turn to the generation of Clare's main love interest, Riedwaan Faizal, who sometimes has to go where Clare cannot. Orford illustrates the physical limitations of her female detective character as she encountered them herself while researching the Cape Town sex industry: 'It's not safe to do a lot of stuff and you're so *conspicuous.* I wanted to research a brothel and there's this really sad brothel in Bree street called "Naughty Forty" … and I stood there at the door and I wanted to go in, but I can't…be invisible in there' (11).

Research and hard-hitting issues dear to Orford's heart are filtered through the perspective of characters in order to avoid any artificial sense of getting a message or moral across. Her characters are developed in such a way that statistics on violence against women and the concept of a subliminated civil war being waged in South Africa against women do not seem out of place in a fast-paced, racy 'B-Grade detective fiction[23]' :

> Clare Hart…sees things in a particular way - she responds to violence in particular way- so I filter [my research] through how she would react to things. Other characters who are not like that don't -they do other stuff. What I've tried to get is to keep it in character and then you'd have your reactions and comments according to how a character… would respond…. Then you get these feminist responses because a feminist who's bothered by violence against women, will see patterns that somebody who's not aware of those things won't see (16).

Sometimes the genesis of ideas cannot be explained in a clearly logical way and this is where the imagination or subconscious seems to be an accepted fact in her writing process. When she was asked about surprises in the writing process, she agreed there were some, for example, when it comes to cameo characters:

> I don't know where they come from…they just sort of come and then… you just kind of like them and then they just have to muscle into the story and stay there. But I suppose the imagination is a quite a marvellous thing and sometimes the way of resolving a story or a plot manifests itself in a character …you sort of think 'OK this is a way of solving this' (21).

[23] This is Orford's own description of her fiction, and possibly refers to a category of film that tends to be a box office hit but which will is sometimes looked down on as not 'high brow' by film critics.

It is intriguing that these 'unexpected' characters are partly the imagination or subconscious *resolving problems* in the plot. This suggests a problem that has already manifested itself and is bothering the author in some way and this is perhaps then processed and subliminated into a character who 'just sort of [comes]', confirming Csikszentmihalyi's assertion that Aha! moments are not as spontaneous as they may seem during the creative process but are rather the result of ongoing mulling over a particular problem below the level of conscious thought until a solution pops into consciousness. In a press interview on *Blood rose* (Pike, 2008) Orford gives a clue to understanding this herself, by saying that while the 'appearance' of 'repressed echoes of apartheid era aggression' in Namibia in her plot 'surprised even [her]' this probably stemmed from her experience of returning to Namibia as a young women 'just after independence - around the time when a very large, well-entrenched SANDF[24] force had just upped and left, almost overnight…. Since then I've always thought that the things that happened there…as well as the remnants of army bases, must surely have left their imprint…' and this helped her to imagine these '[re-emerging] without warning' (Pike 2008). When it comes to epiphanies in the middle of the night or while driving, Orford says these do happen, but often transcribing them in the morning or getting the children to scribble down a note while she is driving leads to a note that is nonsense to her later on. However, she feels the truly brilliant ideas do not get forgotten (22).

Conducting research to generate ideas involves, for Orford, the first-hand observation of not only the jargon, working conditions of forensic specialists, police detectives and so froth, but also how they cope on a personal level with their particularly stressful jobs. While this informs the development of her fictional characters, she says this does not entail 'copying down' a character from life but rather closely observing their behaviour. One coping mechanism she remembers from her research was a mortuary professor who grew beautiful roses outside the ugly building where he conducted his dissections (23). This translates effectively into her characters, who deal with horrific photos of mutilated corpses and then go on to eat delicious lunches, drink whiskey with relish and make love, as happens in *Like clockwork* and *Blood rose.* This could seem a strange reaction to traumatic experiences and it can jar the reader's senses, but it is true to life, as a countering tool: 'You can't make all that horrible stuff go away but you can still grow roses' (23).' However, it is 'also that necessary detachment…not a heartless detachment [but] …not taking on all the sufferings of the world' (23). Once again her interest in women's coping mechanisms in particular and the need for some detachment from guilt and trauma and the defiant reclaiming of the mental space for sexual desire and empowerment emerges (23).

When Orford starts a book, she usually decides what sort of research she needs to do for the story upfront and plans accordingly. Sometimes this involves ballistics training and learning how to shoot (Orford, 2007: 296); sometimes it involves interviewing forensic pathologists or other specialists or sitting in on police autopsies. She says it is important to get these details right (22) and that you cannot 'imagine half of those things' (22)

[24] South African National Defense Force

Even when it comes to the struggle to write something out well once the initial idea comes, Orford has no space for doubt or blocks in her process. She returns to free writing until she gets to a place in herself where she can imagine something happening to her – in the shoes of one of her characters - the image that provides the precision that she is striving for: 'that precision of feeling. It's like going exactly into that place and … dissecting all the layers of the feeling until you get to the essence of it' (24).

When asked if she free writes to experiment until she generates this precision, she agreed, adding, 'that's why I get so many notebooks. It's very hard to talk about a child disappearing for me, having so many children, so it was hard to get to that preciseness' (24). She has to imagine everything in the book happening to herself in a sense if she is to write with this clarity and intensity and she maintains that 'you have to feel it…so [she] write[s] and write[s] and write[s] until that image comes' (24).

This is an emotionally taxing part of the writing process. As a mother of three girls it is a strain sometimes to vividly imagine the kidnapping and abuse of young girls in her books, and yet she puts herself through this in order to produce life-like, gripping fiction (24). This is where support networks are important to deal with her real life while she is diving headlong into this darker parallel world in her imagination, as discussed below under personal environment, but a balance between detachment and observation of real life people and events seems to have to be juggled with an intensive taking on of the roles she has generated in order to get to the essence of what she is writing about.

**3.2.2.3 Organizing**

In her primary analogy for the writing process, Orford uses the language of map-making and navigation, while later on in the interview she repeatedly used the word 'distill' and also once the analogy of building. These analogies reflect how meticulous and methodical she is in planning from a central idea to scenes and chapters which are free-written in her notebooks, to a first typed up draft which she can print out to rework. Her planning works from free writing of the dramatic key moments she has generated to finding ways to build connections between them so that the reader can be 'shepherded' between them (1-2) and working on a feeling until she can get to the essential image that will convey this emotional truth best. There is a sense of control over the writing process, even the parts where she organizes her time to allow for her imagination or the subconscious to come into play in its mysterious ways.

She writes the end first so that she knows where she is going and has an emotional resolution she can hold onto while writing through all the violence and bleakness, and to keep the book focused (2). After this, she begins to think about time and structures the book around how long the story will take and the timing of the different components of the plot as they unfold (2).

Despite writing in a very specific genre, Orford does not follow a formula when planning her books or their plots (15). She comments that ' …it hasn't…worked out for me to have a that sort of pattern because I'm not so interested in the police procedural - there are a whole lot of social things that I want to write about' (15). She says there are some patterns in the sense that 'in the beginning is some kind of

disruption of stasis and then resolution in the end' (15) and there is always an investigation of sorts, which has to involve Clare Hart being called in, and it has to end in closure of some kind (15). Notwithstanding, she says she would be 'bored rigid' with writing to a set formula (15). For Orford, the most consistent organising thread across the different books is actually the relationship between Clare and Riedwaan (18) and how this love story will resolve itself.

Orford holds that 'one of the key things that allows you to write' is that she is 'very confident about [her] own ability to sustain things'. She thinks that this is 'one of the key things that allows you to write a book' as it requires a 'totality of vision and that's in a way what works with film directing. Its completely hierarchical being a film director: you have to have a totality of vision of what you want to create before it's made' (18). This means that when something new materialises during the writing process, you are able to decide easily whether it is 'part of the picture'. Orford suggests that writing is like directing in that 'you have to have this kind of megalomaniac vision about what your book will be, otherwise you get lost' (18).

While Orford is aware of other thriller writers 'in which the plot is utterly formulated… and you read it and you are completely gripped' despite the characters being flat, the way she writes 'works differently': 'It's very much around how people are and how their histories have shaped them' because 'the kind of person you are is going to determine how you react to certain events.' In order to get to 'those little islands' she says she organizes around particular characters and their responses to what happens to them. She gives the following example:

> in *Like clockwork* what I had was three dead girls, so I had to find out about[ them] so…that gives you a whole organisation around those particular people and who was linked to them and why they were there…. So that was quite a simple – well, I thought it would be simple - way of moving through time. So I'd given myself four weeks to fit that into (5).

Her physical organising tools include a big poster on which she draws shapes and inserts words to roughly map out relationships between characters and parts of the story and scraps of paper with sketches and words scribbled on them. The physical shape of the narrative is visibly different for each book: the drawing for *Daddy's girl* is a circle in which Orford has the abducted child in the centre 'and all the things that go on around' her. She describes this as reminiscent of 'a black hole around this vanished child. By contrast, '*Like clockwork* was linear' (18). She showed me some of these plans and they are the sort of scribbles that only the author would understand fully, using as they do visual symbols to show connections between different elements. The circle mentioned above was a simple sketch that would be rich with meaning to Orford but to me looks like a meaningless doodle of a few words vaguely circling around a central word or two. Another of her plans looks like a miniature storyboard for a film, with ring-binders drawn between different pages spread out across the landscape oriented page (figure 3.1).

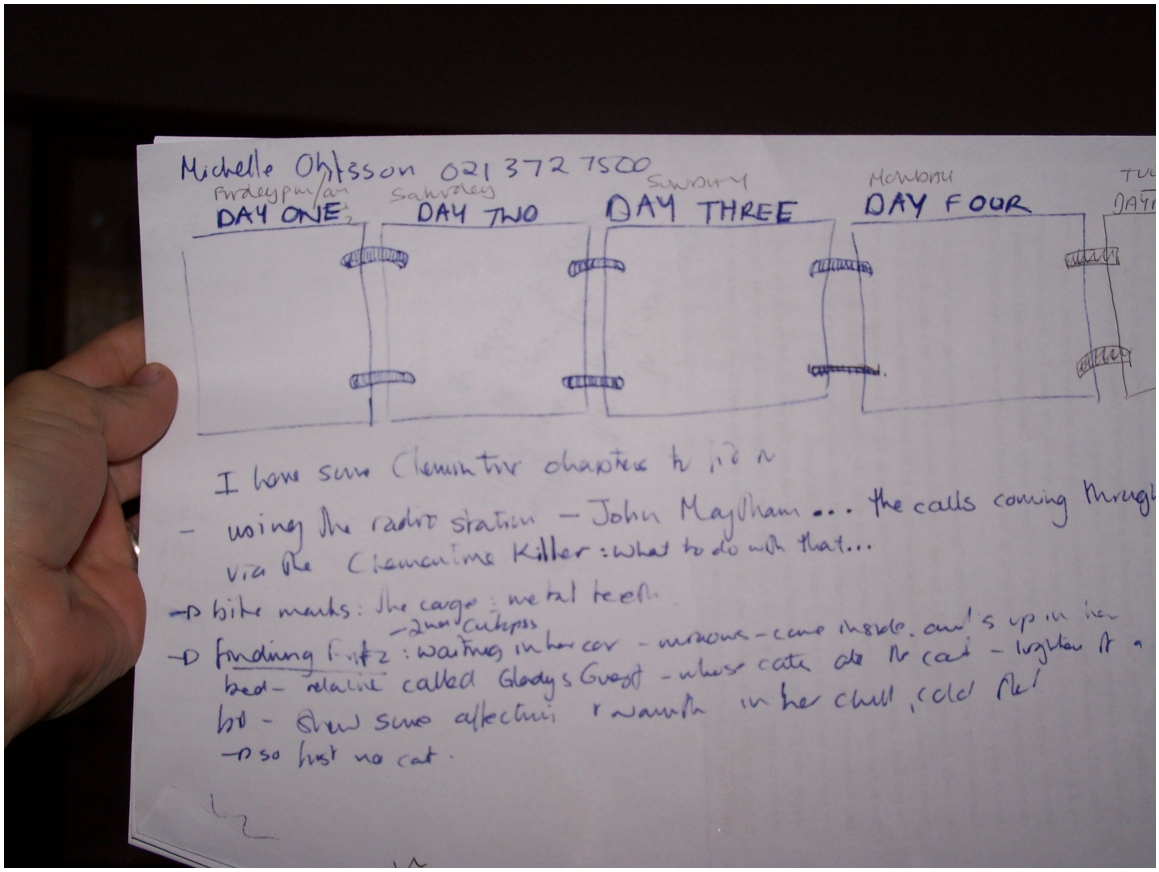


*Figure 3.1 Orford's organizing notes showing the use of the storyboard technique.*

These story boards are clearly being used to decide across how many days the plot will be spread. This is thus a sketch of the early planning of a plot. However, most of these visual maps of the plot seem to come into their own *during* the writing process rather than simply in the beginning. They increase in complexity and are used not just to plan what *will* happen but to track what has *already* happened during the writing process, and managing what Flower and Hayes called the 'emerging text' as it develops. She describes this process as follows: 'So I had this body found and then I mapped out who was where 'cause you kind of need to keep a picture of where everybody is even if they are off scene, off the stage' (18)[25]. For *Daddy's girl*, which she was completing at the time of the interview, she showed me a table or spreadsheet in which she tracked the development of a character and various clues over different chapters. She remarks that this 'makes you visualise the whole picture and then chunks of it…right down to the detail (18).

Some sort of tracking mechanism is probably critical in any story, but perhaps even more so in the 'whodunit' world of the police procedural detective thriller, where

[25] She makes comparisons between herself as an author and being a stage or film director frequently throughout the interview and this underscores the complexity of the task.

clues and events have to be in the right spot at the right time not to give up the game too quickly. Orford speaks particularly of these maps helping her to gauge the pace of the novel– from the gestures she made, they act almost as a cardiograph tracking the climaxes and sloughs in the action as the story unfolds.

I asked if these maps are displayed where she can see them while she is writing but she replied, 'No. Just at key points I'll map it out and see what's missing. Like in this rewrite thing now [completing *Daddy's girl*] … there's a couple of threads in the plot [for] which I'm going need to do that' (18). So it is the problem solving part of the organising process that matters rather than rigidly adhering to a particular plan.

She acquired some of these organising tools in her work in film, such as story boarding, and others in her work in publishing, namely using double page spreads and flat plans (which show the layout of content on pages and are used to do a mock-up of the content to see if the writing is going according to plan and where allowances have to be made for more or less text).

The image of the map stays consistent throughout this part of the discussion, which links to navigation as Orford's cohesive metaphor for the writing process. She demonstrated with her hands at one point that she needed to give the reader plenty of 'little climaxes' in between a gripping beginning and end to keep the pace exciting (22), so her mapping is also 'a way of pacing those [climactic moments] out'. However, the free-writing in her notebooks around the initial story concept comes first, before this mapping out really starts to take shape. When I asked if she actually plans that 'after these several pages you're going to have a lift' or climax, she responded in the negative: 'No, I write it and then I look at it and then I draw the diagram in response to what I've written…in response to the first draft. And then I'll see it's too compressed or too spread out' (18).

It would, then, be easy to misconceptualise this aspect of Orford's writing process as a rigid planning tool that guides her writing as she works but it seems to be more a gauge for revision and to track and evaluate the emerging text to see first, where she is in the writing process at the moment; secondly, where she needs to go next, and thirdly, what needs fixing in terms of overall plot structure and the logical coherence of the story as it is being lived out by her characters. She describes it not as rigid and controlled but as 'organic' (19), implying growth and fluidity.

I was particularly curious about how an author plans a long and complex narrative with 'everything coming together' towards the end. Orford explained that 'if your plot is working it kind of just happens' like that: 'in a way you've got all this investigation you're asking lots of open-ended questions and you don't know where they are going to go and then suddenly things start falling away or you have a piece of luck and then you get that rush feeling in the end' (19).

The successful plot seems then to come down to the initial story idea being a good one and having the stamina to work through any hitches that come up in the actual writing out of that story. As with generating ideas, there is no room in Orford's organising process for writer's block. She has had moments where she has hit real snags in the story but she says she has to work through it and make it work out. In the case of her current experience of writing *Daddy's girl*, she remarks: [it] is a fairly

basic and gripping story…so then it's up to me…. I have got some real plot glitches but its more - it's like applying your mind and making it work because I know that the basic story is good (20).

To sum up, it seems that many of the tools one would normally think of as planning tools (and which are often taught as such) are perhaps inseparable from the revision stage as tracking and evaluating tools as well as problem solving tools. They help Orford to map where she is in her exploration of the developing story and to make decisions about what content or images still need generating and to evaluate how closely she has achieved her goals of pace and intensity for her plot. This is coherent with her analogy of the South Sea Island explorers who did not have maps to follow to an already chartered destination. However, they had ways of tracking where they were and reading the signals for where they needed to go, once they had set out with a purpose to explore and find what they needed in unchartered waters.

### 3.2.3 Reviewing: evaluating and revising

The reviewing process is, as Flower and Hayes suggested, one of ongoing evaluation and revision that forms an integral part of the writing process from the moment Orford's initial free-writing is transcribed from her notebooks onto the computer until the book is complete. It is certainly not a final stage at the very end of the writing process. I will go through this process step by step as it takes some clarifying from the transcript because Orford was speaking and at the same time showing me what she meant by flipping through various drafts.

Once she has completed her initial synopsis for the story, this is revised with input from her agent and publisher until the core story has been clarified. Orford then free writes in her notebooks to generate material, as discussed previously. She then types these notes into her computer. From this point, she alternates for a long time between reviewing and planning, including generating, organising and goal setting.

Once she has done what she calls a 'paste up' or basic arrangement of her notebook material on the computer, she will 'put it into chapters and shuffle it around' (32). The resulting draft is printed out and ring bound in A4 format, and Orford reads through it, evaluating and revising, scribbling notes in the margins and drawing lines through large sections of text. Once this reading is complete, she will return to her notebooks and 'free write again bits that [she has] missed, that [she has] done wrong' (32). This new material is then typed up and integrated into a new draft, which she prints out in the same way as the first one, only this time the book is much thinner as she prints two A5 pages to one A4 piece of paper so that it reads like a book. Once again she will work through this by hand, making notes, moving text around and so forth. This is then retyped, and Orford says she will edit by hand and then make herself put in her changes as she has marked them up 'rather than start editing them again' (33) as she types. She describes this as treating herself 'like a typist' (33) and being 'ruthless', so that even if something bothers her while she is retyping, she will type it anyway and 'just follow [her] own instructions' (33), but will make a note of the problem so that when she does her next print out she will make the decision to rework it once more or not.

At this stage, she starts working through different printed copies of the book, doing a 're-edit' (33) trying to follow the development of the story from each main character and some peripheral characters' viewpoints. For example, she showed me a typed draft which was her 'Clare edit,' looking 'at the whole story form her point of view.' She will go through most of her main characters in their own edit, in order to guard against anything that seems out of character, so that any research on, for example, the forensic details of the crime, are only spoken about by a character who would know these things (22). Once again, this ties into her goal of creating plausible, believable characters, and highlights the centrality of character to plot development.

This process is a case of rewriting then revising, evaluating these revisions, and then rewriting once more. The physical process of writing by hand, then typing out these notes, then working through this until a first draft is printed, then editing this on paper and retyping it with the corrections, then reprinting it and re-editing it is described in more detail in the transcription section, however the transcription process itself appears to be part of the reviewing process.

In total, Orford goes through twenty to thirty revisions of her manuscript *after* the initial handwritten notebook versions are typed up. When I remarked that many people feel that once their work is typed up and printed out this is the end of the writing process, she agreed: 'You think typing is good writing – it's just neat' (39). She says once the manuscript is typed up in a format she can hold in her hand so that she can 'feel it' as a book 'read… over a day or two', she '[reads her] own manuscript as a reader.' This is why she simply types in her new changes after these revisions without evaluating them, because 'you've got this experiential time of reading a book and different things crop up compared to when you knit on the [computer] screen' (34).

Orford feels that this reworking is a major contributing factor to the quality of books and 'a lot of South African books are terrible because the published version is like a first draft' with no spelling mistakes, but begging the question 'where's the novel in this?' (35). She feels the sophistication of a novel comes from 'working and reworking and reworking' (35).

Figure 3.2 shows one step in this process, where a second printed draft of her book is being edited. Even at a glance it can be seen most of the revisions are at a paragraph rather than at sentence or word level. Orford is wrestling with the development of the story here rather than correcting the specifics of spelling or word choice.

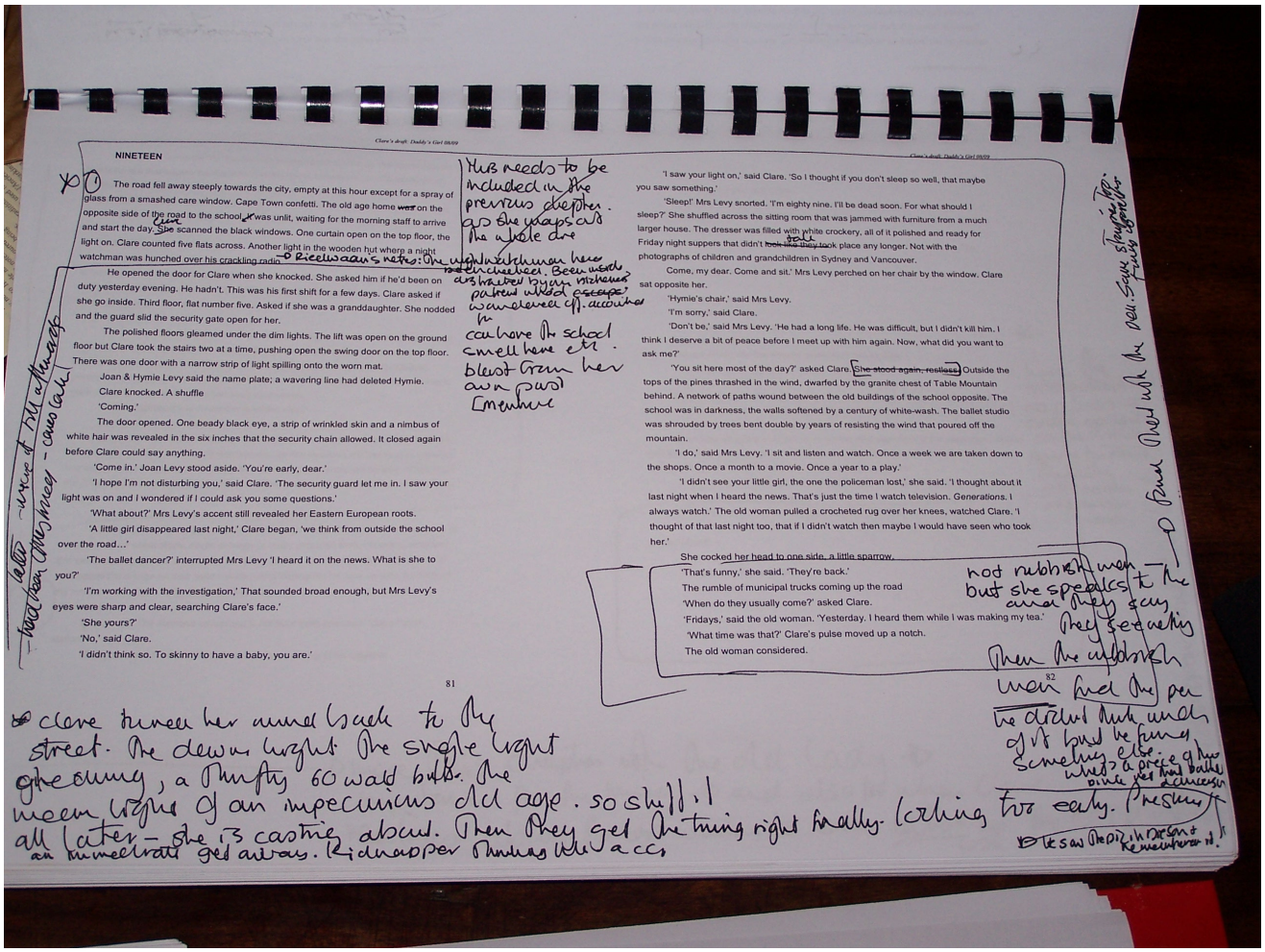


*Figure 3.2 Orford's revisions on a printout of a draft manuscript at the point where she is printing it in a quasi-novel format in order to get the overall feel of the manuscript as a book. Notes on this draft indicate that fresh bouts of planning were stimulated by the reviewing process.*

Revision is closely linked to goals and to deciding where her writing is matching up to the goals Orford has set herself. This is particularly clear when it comes to writing style: 'My aim is to be as spare and precise as possible: to cut out all the extraneous words because I actually overwrite too, I think, in the beginning. And then to get rid of adverbs, adjectives - fuss over descriptions…. as soon as you cut the better it gets' (12).

She describes her revision method as ruthless because 'usually if you over describe something it means you are actually not sure about what you're trying to say' (15). She cuts as she writes, paring things down. With one particular paragraph, she describes cutting out fifty words and replacing it with one: 'I thought, "What is this guy trying to say? I think he wants to say 'no.' " So I just cut it all out- fifty words - and just said "no" and it was fine' (13).

Repeatedly, she underscores her preference for 'a very, very pared down style' which she says suits the genre she writes in and is 'not associated really with a feminine style and women's writing' (13). She declares her love for 'verbs and action -they're

stories about people doing stuff so the more you can get things into a verb – subject, verb is my ideal sentence' (13). A sample of her writing from a particularly tense scene towards the end of *Blood rose* (2007: 282), when the serial killer is about to execute Riedwaan, illustrates this almost graphic novel style:

She flicked off the safety catch. She was so close, he could feel the warmth of her. It chilled him. She touched the gun against his forehead – cold, like a dog's snout, and stepped back.
Knees soft, elbows locked.
She breathed in slowly.
Then out.
She knew what she was doing.

The layout of the text shows these short sentences written in poetic or dialogue form one under the other. These lines end a chapter and the reader has to wait a few more pages for the outcome. This style is exceptionally effective in building suspense and fear.

At a certain point in the writing process, when she feels the story is 'ready' the 'input of an outside person is amazingly valuable' (17) because, even if she does not change what they have suggested, she takes their comments into account as they might have found something that is not quite right because a detail was left out somewhere else in the text (17).

Orford does not share her work in progress with anyone close to her, but does evaluate and revise initial synopses with her agent, who might query how a particular issue is going to be resolved and make other suggestions (17). She says she does not mind suggested revisions from her agent or her publisher or editor and that she is 'incredibly cooperative' (17). She says that rather than think that comments mean they do not like her book, she takes them into account as 'it almost always is the things that have bothered me a bit as well' (17). She points out that an outsider can often spot an error where the writer reaches a point where she cannot see the wood for the trees anymore.

Her agent and sometimes her publisher will return their editing comments to her on 'marked-up sheets' and then Orford will 'probably put in all the suggestions and make the changes and then read it through and then do another version and send it back to them' (35). The agent and publisher seem to spot such problems as 'plot discrepancies and… places where it was a bit too long' (35). Only after this is the manuscript potentially ready for an editor for proofreading, and then Orford says 'it's back and forth [making changes], but you can never get tired of that'. When I asked what happens if she does ever get tired of this process she replied: 'I just get untired' (35), implying that this process is not negotiable for a professional writer.

While she has great 'control of language' (29) she does not 'particularly care about formal grammar' and she leaves the final proofreading of her manuscripts to editors and the proofreaders at her publisher. However, it is important not to oversimplify this point and claim that she does not care about the language editing of her work at all. It is rather a case of spelling and punctuation weighing less in the balance than, for example, the choice of image or the tying up of the plot. It is also a matter of being too involved in the story to even see the language errors she might have made. She feels that writers worry about 'spelling and grammaring and punctuation often too

early in the process so you get afraid of what you're writing and then you start nitpicking details' (29).

She maintains that she values well-edited work 'highly' (29) and that revising work has value not simply for the production of a neat and presentable manuscript, but 'you should polish your stuff to the best of your ability because in that polishing… in the final phases you polish the manuscript in all sorts of ways' (29). So she does try to proofread her work, but not too early in the process, and in the final analysis she has to admit defeat on some counts and allow others to find the continuity glitches and the language errors.

### 3.2.4 Translation and the impact of physical environment and translation tools as situational variables

While analyzing the four interview transcripts, it was difficult to separate out the process of translating words and diagrams onto paper or computer from the writers' attitudes to or particular use of tools and equipment, and the locations in which this translation occurred. Thus the process of translation and the situational variables of physical environment and translation tools have been incorporated into one category for all the interview discussions and for the concluding summary in Chapter Seven.

In Orford's studio there are piles of the notebooks, discussed under generating and reviewing above. Orford moves between notebook, computer and printed page, depending on which part of her writing process she is engaged in. She also moves location, from her writing studio at the top of the garden to her house, to coffee shops for company and retreats into the country for solitude. First at the significance of the notebooks will be examined in more detail, followed by the computer, the printed drafts, and the writing spaces she occupies.

These notebooks, which she constantly has with her, were once inexpensive ring-bound 'reporter's notebooks' but 'they would get lost…and they're just kind of ephemeral' (27) so she progressed to the plush solidity of the famous and expensive moleskine diaries. It is worth investigating the rationale behind anything which has had significant amounts of money or effort invested in it and even the smaller moleskins cost around R170 each. Apart from being less physically flimsy than reporter's notebooks, Orford justifies her choice as follows:

> It's partly romantic – it's nice to write in …I like an aesthetic space and … my studio is very tidy and clean and I like flowers and so for me those little moleskines are nice objects. I like to have a nice pen that feels nice in my hand… [the moleskines] look like books. I can keep them and I number them and I go back to them when I'm working on a book. So it's an aesthetic thing and I'm sure I would wish I was a Picasso or Bruce Chatwin (27).

This association with famous artists and writers is in fact advertised in the moleskines[26] (27) and it implies a symbolic engagement with others in various art

[26] A leaflet in six languages that goes in every Moleskine diary and notebook bears the 'history of a legendary notebook' (2010), stating that 'Moleskine is the heir of the legendary notebook used for the past two centuries by great artists and thinkers, including Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemmingway, and Bruce Chatwin. This trusty, pocket-sized travel companion held their sketches, notes, stories, and ideas before they became famous images or beloved books.'

domains as part of her identity as a writer. I noted that she seems to prefer the A5 moleskines and she said this was because they fitted into her handbag (27). Portability and practicality as well as symbolic and aesthetic values thus play a role in her selection of notebook.

She chooses to work on a laptop rather than a desktop computer for very similar reasons – a combination of aesthetics and portability: 'its way less ugly[27] and it's small and I move' (27). She moves around her home to write – sometimes in her studio and sometimes in the main house, but she also takes it with her when she goes away on retreat to write. She says the laptop can be a problem, though, as when she takes it with her she worries about it getting stolen and then does not get any work done (27).

When she prints out her drafts to read and rework by hand, she has them ring-bound so that they look and feel like a book to her. She calls this one of her 'rituals' (32) and it helps her enter into the space-time world of reading her material as a book rather than on screen, which she defines as more cerebral. She did a typing course, and so she says she is a 'very fast typist' and she types faster than she writes, so it might seem logical that she would wish to get down her thoughts on the laptop first, quickly, before they elude her. However, she holds that 'writing by hand is different - it has that physiological feeling it goes from here [she gestured to her heart] to the hand to the page' (29).

Her notebooks and her printed drafts are in a sense more than just the tools of her trade; they are the symbols of it. She is producing a book, so on some level it seems to get her into the right frame of mind for writing if she has this end goal physically in sight. The moleskins 'look like books' and the printouts look like books so she can feel the book, the end product, is within her grasp.

As there are a number of different places where she works, the material transcribed or tools used can differ from place to place. She takes her notebooks with her rather than her laptop when she conducts research to fill in reporter's notes on those impressions that need to 'sink in' and 'filter through' her subconscious until they are ready to come out in her writing in a new form. This translation process is thus part of her generation of ideas. Her free writing is also located in these notebooks, and is always transcribed in pen, by hand. For her this is the 'feeling' part of the writing, what creativity books might refer to as 'right brain' (non logical, non linear) writing, uncensored, unedited. When she types these notebooks onto her computer she says she tries to 'type exactly what [she has] written and then edit it because…the writing it and then the deciphering it, … and then the typing up makes you locate yourself in that chapter' (28).

So the transcription process itself is not simply mechanical as the commonly used expression 'getting thoughts onto paper' suggests, but rather a part of the cognitive processing of those ideas as well. Notwithstanding, she does sometimes find it expedient to get someone she does not know, such as a professional typist, to type her notebooks into a Microsoft Word document for her to start work on. Judging by the

[27] Her laptop is a slim and stylish white one, in contrast to Van de Ruit's description of his 'grotesque' laptop in Chapter Six.

number of notebooks she is working from, this is probably a time saving device. Getting someone she does not know to do the job is probably due to the fact that she does not want input from an outsider on the work at this stage in her creative process. These notes are for her eyes only. When asked if seeing the notes typed up by someone else disconnected her from the chapter (in opposition to what she mentioned about typing it herself 'locating [her] in that chapter') she said that this was not a problem. She would in this case sometimes read through what was on the screen and the notebooks at the same time, but she said 'I know pretty much what I've written' (29).

The original transcription process has then possibly also helped fix transient thoughts and fleeting inspiration into her long term memory. Having the work move from handwritten to typed up is furthermore a process of 'externalising it' (29) and is almost a symbolic act of moving from the more 'feeling' side of her writing process (such as generating ideas and sketching out plans for the plot) to the more 'cerebral' side (structuring or organising the material around time, was an example she gave at another stage in the interview).

Sometimes Orford goes to cafes to write and 'be surrounded by noise' (28), but she says she mainly likes being in her writing studio (28). The writing studio is an elegant, minimalist little hut at the back and top of their steeply sloped property. It was designed for her by her architect husband and had to be small enough not to require planning permission, so it is the dimensions of a tool shed. It has a spacious feel that belies its size, with plain white walls and floor-to-ceiling windows offering views up Table Mountain on the one side (the house is set on the slopes of the mountain). Her desk is positioned in front of a window with a view over the house down to Cape Town harbour. Orford is greeted at the studio door by a knee-high white stone Buddha, sitting serenely cross-legged. The monastic simplicity of the hut gives it the feeling of a miniature mediation retreat. There are two main splashes of strong, feminine colour that add zest and match her taste in colourful clothing: a string of cerise paper hearts and a sumptuous turquoise chaise longue stretched along the wall with the mountain view window. On a simple wooden desk there rests a slim white laptop and one of her elegant black moleskin notebooks. In neat piles on the wooden floor against the wall behind the desk, there are piles of even more notebooks and she shows me the thickness of the pile she has used for each of her two previous novels. Another pile contains copies of her published novels with foreign titles and alternative publishers' covers.

The studio is a stark contrast to her family home, which is equally beautiful, but packed with paintings, prints, photographs, knick-knacks and books, and which is where she stores the archives of rough typed drafts and her messier plans, posters, tabulated tracking plans described in this chapter, and where her busy family life is centred. There is a dramatic contrast between the inside of the house and the 'hut' and it is possible that these also reflect different states of mind Orford needs to compose and live in – a serene, quiet one in a place apart, and one full of the collective memories and interests of a large family. She clearly sees both the house and the hut as her writing domain, however, and will not allow cleaners or other strangers into either while she is in the more intense phases of writing, saying that the house just gets progressively dirtier at these times.

Her need for solitude can become so intense that she needs to go on retreat to a place in the country – she has been to several and makes appeals for ideas for a 'quiet, safe retreat' on her home page blog (Orford, 2008c). It appears that these are times when she either needs to read through her manuscript in one go (as part of reviewing) or when she needs to distance herself from her family while getting into the state where she can truly feel the emotions that she is writing out (as part of generating).

### 3.2.5 The significance of taking breaks

Orford takes small breaks during the day for tea or to wander around her garden. She also likes to take time out to go to gym or exercise at the end of the day, and claims that she was influenced by her heroine, Clare Hart, to take up jogging[28].

She goes on longer retreats as well, but these appear to be part of the writing process when she is particularly intensely involved in her work, rather than a break from the writing process to mull things over (25). When questioned about breaks, at first she seemed keen to point out how hard she works, but she seemed to realize later that I was probing for evidence of a critical part of the day to day writing process rather than looking for proof of slouching, and began to open up more. Where at first she said she only stops for a break when her eyes give out (25), she later described naps and other breaks as important to her generation of ideas.

Orford takes short rests on the day bed in her studio every time her 'brain gets too hot' and further describes these moments as a 'different type of tiredness' felt while you are creating something, 'like someone sucked all the oxygen out of your brain so you can do this really intense think' (26). She describes her lying down periods as both special thinking periods and rests after the resolution brought on by these thinking periods has taken place. She had apparently had a lie down just before the interview because she had 'suddenly resolved something that had been bothering' her and 'the thinking has taken so long' she then lay down to 'have a little nap.' This is not really sleeping, she says, but rather a kind of meditative state which results in a solution appearing after 'you close you eyes and you let your mind go and then some subliminal things connect'. She accounted for this as the 'brain… divided into the cerebral brain and the feeling brain, they both think but they think in different ways' (26). She further described it as 'a little absence from yourself …. I often feel it in my body, like this sort of tingly feeling, almost like a form of arousal, but a very physical response like a physical thought rather than a mental' one. She describes this as being a 'very exhilarating feeling' and it seems key to incubating and generating ideas as well as problem resolution, in keeping with Csikszentmihalyi's conclusions that problem resolution is a deeply satisfying, intrinsically motivated activity for creative people.

### 3.2.6 The impact of the domain and field

Questions on the impact of knowledge of and access to the domain and field on the creative writing process led to answers foregrouded skills and training acquired in the

[28] …and give up smoking. In return, Clare was made to give up whiskey in deference to Orford's preference for wine.

domain and incorporated into the long-term memory. These questions also revealed interactions with publishers in the field who provide feedback on the developing text, help finance full-time writing and exert pressure on the creative writing process by setting deadlines and contracting for future books.

#### 3.2.6.1 Knowledge of the domain: skills and training

Orford credits many of her skills to her training and work in documentary film making, journalism and publishing, rather than school. Her early interest in reading is also credited to her family's interests rather than her experience of school, which she said would have killed the desire to read in most children. Likewise, she credits her real excitement in her discovery of literature about and from Africa to her university studies. She is vague about any contribution school made to her career as a writer. However, it is clear that she is steeped in what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'the domain of the word' and has internalized the work of the authors and works that she loves, as well as the story telling techniques of camera-men she has worked with, the writing style of the university professor she admires and the stories of the diverse peoples she helped tell in her work as a commissioning editor in Namibia. She speaks of writing and of books with a confident conviction borne of all this experience and a passion for the domain in which she works. At the same time, she employs formidable skills in financial and publishing strategies without letting the lack of 'romance' this might suggest to some detract from her identity as a creative writer. It is part of how she makes her way as a writer and there is much that young aspiring writers could learn from her if they wish to have a writing career that pays for itself.

Her work as a commissioning editor with Namibians who had survived 'very traumatic experiences in the war' also stimulated her interest in violence as a topic, as did her own experiences of violence later as a journalist and earlier as an incarcerated and interrogated student. She says this training was also important because 'you learn your confidence through writing books that you're less vested in because the rhythm of writing a book, whether it's for *War and peace* or whether it's a reader for grade one is: beginning, middle, end, and you have to decide how you're going to do it and then do it and finish it…so you learn that pattern' (41). This is conspicuously similar to the way Paul Gallico, in *Confessions of a storyteller* (1961) describes his daily sports column for a newspaper as excellent training for his fiction career as he had to learn to write well, write often and write to deadline whether he felt inspired or not.

Reading is given special importance in Orford's perception of how she 'trained' as a writer. In a previous interview (Magwood, 2008) Orford said that she would not be the successful writer she is today 'without being born into a family of readers.' She taught herself to read on her grandfather's Transvaal farm before she started school, dipping into what she describes as 'one of those eclectic libraries that develops when families live for three, four generations in one place.' Her liberal home and conservative school experiences did not always match up. She describes having Darwin read to her before she went to school as 'not a help in a Sub A classroom in Klerksdorp in 1971[29]' (Orford, 2008b). She 'continued reading, despite being made to

[29] She says she realized this after 'helpfully explaining to [her] teacher that Adam and Eve was a simple story to explain evolution to wandering peasants who didn't know better and that she should rather tell us about the theory of evolution'(Orford, 2008b).

go to school' and 'smuggled in books from home and slipped them into [her] school books' (Orford 2008b). However, as she grew up, she came to feel that 'what [she] read and what [she] saw stopped squaring up' (Orford 2008b) as the books available to her were set in the northern hemisphere. It was at university that she started to read books about Africa or by African authors that would change the way she saw the world. As examples, she cites Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*, Conrad's *Heart of darkness,* Coetzee's *Waiting for the barbarians* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous conditions*. These books were banned in 1980s South Africa and had to be read 'in special locked rooms with permission from the Minister of the Interior' (Orford, 2008b). She says this helped her understand the 'power and terror that books represent to corrupt and brutal states' and that 'contained in the neat, quiet covers of books are freedom and compassion, the space for reflection and the ability to imagine otherness' (Orford, 2008b).

Her extensive and sensitive reading clearly helped her develop her later content goals where she focused on Southern African settings and the power books have to expose and explore pressing social issues and create alternative realities. A key influence was novelist Milan Kundera, on whom she did her Honours thesis (13) and whose inspiration for her own treatment of the erotic is discussed under the generation of ideas above. Her detailed analysis of Kundera's writing style and content has paid dividends years later as it translates itself into her own style and content goals. Likewise, her first hand experiences with J.M. Coetzee as both a teacher and evaluator of her academic writing and as a fiction writer she greatly admires, have influenced her goal for a pared down style as mentioned previously. Exposure during her early adult development as a writer to one of South Africa's greatest literary figures must have undoubtedly made its impression – both because this writer was made 'real' to her as a person she interacted with and not simply as someone to be read about in newspapers, and because of his direct and indirect teaching.

When asked how she would educate young writers, she says she would encourage them to 'read lots' and to work out the reasons behind their preferences and dislikes. She feels strongly that 'you're not going to get anywhere without reading' (50). She says reading other people's writing helps to access 'a genuine feeling rather than personal sentimentality.' She would also get them to bear in mind 'classic thing' of 'writing and finding out what you *don't* know' through writing journalistic prose', interviewing people and learning to tell stories that match their interests. This will encourage 'genuine observation' and a movement from the concrete to the imaginary. She feels that 'to write, you have to get youngsters to access…some kind of authenticity and truth within themselves' (42).

She prescribes practising writing daily just like 'doing scales for piano' (42). When it comes to technical facility in transcribing, she says that 'the better the child's language… the easier it is to write' and 'grammar and spelling need to be correct' but that teachers 'are so inclined to jump on things that are wrong instead of the parts that are effective in terms of creating a response…you need to respond to where the child has expressed something well' (42).

### 3.2.6.2 Knowledge of and access to the field

Writing is Orford's 'first love', but this presented her with a problem, as, like Beake, Orford feels 'you couldn't feed a church mouse on what you make from fiction sales in South Africa' (Orford, 2008a: 109). She made the decision to write full time after completing a Fulbright Scholarship in 2001. This involved a determined financial strategy, which she explains in an article called *Financing fiction* (Orford, 2008a: 109). She planned to first earn at least ten percent of her income from writing and build from there. She worked freelance as a journalist and did commissioned book projects, concentrating on school textbooks, which provide royalties. The first book she published was a children's book. She was strategic about who she published with, only working for large publishers with 'substantial marketing budgets'. When she received a large royalty cheque for a textbook, she allowed herself five months to write her first novel. She says '[she] was so scared [she] would fail that [she] sat down to write for twelve hours every day, ever weekend and every night' (Orford, 2008a, 109). The hard work paid off when *Like clockwork* was published by Oshun and her London agent secured deals in Germany, France, Holland, Russia and the Czech Republic, as well as a 'six-figure deal in the UK'.

She said that doing royalty-generating work rather than work that receives once-off payments, a writer has an income that continues independently of their efforts (Orford, 2008a: 109), freeing up time to write more. In our interview she describes her strategy as both a 'gamble' and a business plan to invest in her time 'because writing is a business' (4) and this has worked for her so far. However, as described in chapter two, her first entry into the competitive world of adult fiction publishing was a result of a gambler's lie as much as her hard work and methodical business planning, as she did not in fact have a completed novel but only a synopsis for the novel that the publishers accepted[30]. Fortunately they did not mind when she confessed that she only had the synopsis, probably because it is current practice, as Beake also pointed out, to give publishers or agents a synopsis rather than a manuscript for a proposed book.

Writing books that have been pre-sold in England by her agent and which have to be produced by a particular deadline puts enormous pressure on the writer, and Orford says it is unbelievably tough 'to have to write a book that's better than the last books that is already sold and that I've been paid to write: it's *terrible*' (5). However the advance payments buy the author the time to write (5).

Orford stresses the importance of being able to work to deadline, which her background in journalism and publishing helped train her for: 'I have always worked to deadline so I like having a deadline…its like writing the end [first] - it's the same logic…. Having a deadline sort of organizes my mind and my time' (4). Her writing experience in other fields helps her to evaluate when she thinks she might go over a deadline and this helps her to negotiate openly with her publishers if deadlines need extending.

[30] What she does not mention in other interviews but did in mine was that she gave the publishers a completed manuscript for what she calls a 'worthy' (she seems to mean literary and serious) novel in a rural setting and the synopsis for *Like clockwork*. The publishers' response to the completed novel was not particularly enthusiastic but they were extremely interested in her idea for crime fiction.

When it comes to access to the world of publishing, she maintains that it is the first book that is the hardest. Once your first book is published, she says 'you will always be published if you produce material of a reasonable standard' (42). The first book provides the start of a 'portfolio' and 'then you go' (42).

### 3.2.7 Personal relationships as situational variables

Orford has been married for over 20 years to an architect, and has three daughters, aged 20, 16 and 12. When asked how she coped with immersing herself in images of kidnapped and sometimes tortured or sexually abused children while having to support her own daughters living normal lives without becoming paranoid, Orford said that she does sometimes feel strained but she is lucky enough to be able to hire an au pair, who can fetch the children from school and do the shopping (37). She says delegating is important as previously she would 'want to kill' her children 'if they were two minutes late' – when she does not have to focus directly on, for example, fetching them from school, this anxiety is also partly delegated (24).

She says it is not easy to stay detached and she has to balance out her year rather than her days (24). This means spending some blocks of time away from home or even sending her family away so that she can be alone when the work gets 'obsessive' (30). She says her family are used to her working rhythms as she has 'always worked and travelled a lot and worked a lot in [her] brain so [her] girls are kind of used to that (24), although she adds: 'It's not a very sane thing to do' (30). It is, however, part of who she is, as she says, 'I have to work; I get unbearably anxious if I don't. It builds - its like I've swallowed a brick and I have to go into my studio and then I'll calm down again' (38).

She takes breaks in the evening so that the family can eat together and they do not have a television so they spend quality time talking (25) but she may tell them she is going to concentrate on her work for several weeks and then take extended time off to spend with them. Her husband plays a significant role, not only by not objecting to her work hours, but also in acting as a co-parent (her phrase). She says an important aspect of coping with sometimes conflicting needs of family and work as a female writer is to believe in yourself and what you do (38) and that she pretends that she is a man, or as she says, 'not quite that I'm a man, but I've always believed in my own work and creativity and my writerhood and I don't feel guilty. I have no mother's guilt (37). She is fortunate in that she claims this guilt 'just never existed in [her] head' (37) although it seems to help that the proceeds of her work help to support her family financially.

This is juggling of writerhood and motherhood is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood (2002) speaking of the writer's double 'Jekyll and Hyde' personality, alternating between the mild-mannered alter-ego' and what she reports Isak Dinesen's describing as the "deep and dangerous little figure – consolidated, alert and ruthless – the story-teller of all the ages". Atwood suggests that Dinesen would have understood this transmutation well, having, '[l]ike several other women writers, [gone] Dr. Jekyll one better and got a sex change into the bargain' (Atwood, 2002: 39). Fortunately nowadays women writers are not in the position of Dinesen, George Eliot and others who had to literally pretend to be men in order to become published writers, but it is

telling that Orford still feels it necessary to pretend to be a man, in a sense, as a coping mechanism for the sacrifices and detachment the work demands. It seems that fiction writing in particular demands this 'monstrous detachment' (Atwood, 2002) as Orford later admitted to only being able to fully crossing the threshold into fiction writing once her youngest child was at kindergarten age. Prior to that, it sounds as if it was not possible to detach from her maternal instinct enough.

Her first (non fiction) book and her first child were produced at the same time, as she was answering an editor's query while in labour and on her way to hospital in London. However, she admits that full-time fiction writing career only really took off once her youngest child was preschool age, when her 'brain came back' (39). She accounts for this as follows: 'I think it's that constant maternal vigilance that interferes with the creative process, which you still have when your children are older, but it's more contained and you know what it is' (39).

She made the decision not to have a fourth child, even though she wanted one, so that she could continue to channel her energy into her writing, declaring it 'is much easier to have a baby than to write a book' (39). In an email after the interview (Orford, 2009c) she went as far as to say that it is 'terrible to breed because writing is such a solitary activity,' although at the time she was as 'besieged by relatives' while trying to complete her final draft of *Daddy's girl* so she was probably extra sensitive to family demands on her time at that juncture. As mentioned under goal setting, her being a mother has its advantages in providing a driving desire to understand and wrestle with crime rather than simply worry about its effects on her family.

When speaking about how 'unromantic' and practical a writer has to be to survive sometimes, she spontaneously volunteered that: 'you have to be sober and have few addiction problems and the more stable your home life is the better you can write (4). At the same time, writing can provide an alternative to this more conventionally desirable domestic state. At the University of Stellenbosch *Words on water* festival (15 September 2009), she mentioned that Clare Hart's life is partly a fantasy foil to her own as Clare is 'blade thin,' and lives alone in a glamorous, minimalist apartment with only one cat rather than her own dog, husband and three children.

Orford does not see writing as something you can simply fall into because you have the desire to write. Her conception of becoming a writer is that it takes time, training and strategy and that if you wish to become a writer, you are in for the long haul as much as any professional might be: 'it's like if you want to be a judge you don't just become [one]. You study law and become an articled clerk and then become a lawyer and then…you work and you have your aim and your goal' (40). This perception no doubt rests on her own experiences, where she studied journalism and English Literature, read voraciously, wrote for all kinds of publications and for different media before only much later in life penning her first novel.

### 3.3. Concluding remarks

As the nature of each interview discussion does not involve the development of a single thread of argument, the author chapters do not close with a summary. Rather, the conclusions of the research are reserved for the final chapter, where comparisons

are made across all of the authors and conclusions are drawn on the creative writing process as a whole based on these comparisons.

The interviews with the different authors were of different lengths for various reasons discussed in each Chapter as appropriate. Orford's interview took approximately the two hours planned for the interview, including time taken to view her writing studio and her store of writing plans, photographs and drafts. Her interview was also lengthened by the occasional interruption by her children and others' phone calls. Similarly, Beake's interview was interrupted by a coffee break during which she showed me around her home, while Van de Ruit's interview was lengthened in part by the author's willingness to talk about his work and in part by interchanges with the restaurant waiter and Van de Ruit's publicity manager. These interruptions supplied interesting additional information on the writing processes of the authors concerned. Orford, Beake and Van de Ruit's chapters all worked out at approximately the same length due in part to these interruptions and the amount they spoke about the writing process which appeared to really interest them. The reader may then be surprised to note how the following chapter on Imraan Coovadia is significantly shorter than the other three author chapters. This was because the interview was also the shortest, which was in turn due on the one hand to the fact that there were no interruptions to the interview to provide extra clues to the author's working life, and on the other hand the author's admitted personal disinterest in discussing or analysing his creative writing process. This proved to be a useful difference between the authors' attitudes to explore, as is discussed in Chapter Three, and again in the conclusion in Chapter Seven, so this should not be seen as any kind of uneven treatment of or interest in the authors.

# Chapter Four: Imraan Coovadia
# The art and mystery of bonsai cultivation

*He with a smile did then his words repeat;*
*And said, that, gathering leeches, far and wide*
*He traveled; stirring thus about his feet*
*The waters of the pools where they abide.*
*"Once I could meet with them on every side;*
*But they have dwindled long by slow decay;*
*Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may."*

(Wordsworth, circa 1802[31]).

## 4.1 Author background and publishing history

Imraan Coovadia (aged 39) was born in Durban to two doctors. His upbringing was 'interspersed with year-long sojourns in Birmingham, London and Melbourne, Australia' (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2007). He attended the prestigious boys' boarding school, Hilton College in Natal, outside Pietermaritzburg and completed his university studies in America. He first graduated from Harvard in 1993[32], where he majored in philosophy and was also taught by Nobel laureate and Booker Prize-winner J.M. Coetzee (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2007). He then completed a Master of Fine Arts at Cornell University in 1995 and a PhD. at Yale University in 2001[33].

Coovadia was described in the 2008 Franschoek Literary Festival programme as a 'novelist, short story writer, essayist, script-writer and reviewer' (Imraan Coovadia, 2008). He taught 19th Century Studies and Creative Writing at the American universities where he studied, a career he follows to this day in South Africa as a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Cape Town (Umuzi Press, 2009a).

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[31] Stanza 18 of *Resolution and independence* (in Allison, Barrows, et al. Eds. 1983: 549). I open with this stanza of Wordsworth poem as Coovadia refers to it and to the description of the leech gatherer in a reference I make in the introduction. I chose this particular stanza as a humorous cross reference winking, so to speak, at Coovadia's perception of his writing energy as dwindling, despite the fact that he continues to produce novels and stories to delight his readers. I think the stanza reflects the fear many authors seem to grapple with, that their best writing years are behind them – a fear that many, including myself and Elizabeth Gilbert would like to counteract where possible. Wordsworth ends the poem appealing to God to help him remember the leech gatherer to give him strength when he needs it, although, as Coovadia suggests, this is ambiguous: will it help him accept his fate as he ages or struggles with life's challenges or will it inspire him to do better and remind him of his good fortune in life?

[32] Imraan Coovadia [date unconfirmed]

[33] Imraan Coovadia [date unconfirmed]

Coovadia's first novel, *The wedding,* was published in the United States and South Africa in 2001. It has been translated into Hebrew and Italian and was shortlisted for the 2002 Sunday Times Fiction Award, the 2003 Ama-Boeke Prize and the 2005 IMPAC Dublin International Literary Award. It was chosen as book of the week by *Asian Week.com* and bookseller Exclusive Books (Umuzi Press, 2009a). J.M. Coetzee said of the novel that it was 'A tender love story, rendered in prose of dazzling comic wizardry' (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2007). His second novel, *Green-eyed thieves* (2006), was chosen as Book of the Week by SAFM and Exclusive Books, and as Book of the Month by the South African edition of *O Magazine* (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2007). His latest novel, *High, low, in-between*, was released in June 2009. Early reviews from renowned authors Antjie Krog and Vikas Swarup were very positive. Krog said of the novel,

> Imraan Coovadia has a unique and marvelously talented voice. *High Low In-between* effortlessly extended my capacity to imagine the moral inner world of the kind of character I often wonder about,

while Swarup described it as 'A wise book, full of provocative insights' (Umuzi Press. 2009b). It won the 2010 Sunday Times Literary Award for Fiction and the 2010 University of Johannesburg Literary Award, and was shortlisted for the M-Net Award (About Imraan Coovadia, 2010).

In preparation for this interview, Coovadia's first two novels, *The wedding* and *Green-eyed thieves* were read, as well as an article he had written on George Eliot. After the interview, Coovadia was very helpful in sending copies of some of his shorter fiction, namely two short stories: *Composition IV* and *The Azaan clock* and reading these influenced my analysis of the transcript[34].

### 4.2 Discussion of interview transcript

Coovadia kindly invited me to his apartment in Cape Town for this interview. While open and friendly in manner throughout, he seemed to display some hesitation or reticence in answering some questions, and this was my shortest interview. A clue to explain this is given towards the end of the interview, when he said that he is not really interested in the *analysis* of the writing process itself, even if he finds the activity of writing interesting. In his words: 'It just isn't very interesting to me. It's like I forget it all…. Everything is not interesting to me – thinking about it as of itself – but to *do* it is interesting' (23). Another reason he gave for not having answers to some of the questions was that a long time had elapsed since he wrote his books and he found it difficult to remember some aspects of the process. This confirms both Flower and Hayes' and Berkenkotter and Murray's findings on recalling a cognitive process that has already run its course.

Unlike Orford, Beake and Van de Ruit, Coovadia does not make his living from writing alone. He is employed full-time by the University of Cape Town, teaching English Literature and Creative Writing and must attend to the needs of his students

[34] *High, low, in-between* (released in June 2009) had not been published at the time of our interview, so as with Orford's *Daddy's girl,* references to this book are made retrospectively.

as well as his academic writing and other duties. This means it can take him a lot longer to complete a novel and the more strung-out process might be even more difficult to recall and describe than the more compact one year to fourteen months-long process more typical of the full-time writers.

Furthermore, Coovadia was quoted on the University of KwaZulu-Natal (2007) Time of the Writer 2007 website as saying, 'I don't know that I have a philosophy of writing. Writing is as various and indefinable by philosophical tools as any serious activity. There are as many reasons to write or read as writers and readers.'

This is an important point, and while his stance is in contrast to the enthusiasm the other writers expressed for talking about the writing process, it is important in providing an insight into the fact that not every writer is interested in picking apart the mystery of the writing process, and is a crucial reminder to avoid any spurious generalizations in this research. Any insight into the writing process is valuable and this sense of Coovadia not being overly fascinated by the writing process itself and, by extension, not seeing a fascination with the process as necessary to either being a writer or teaching other writers is invaluable. It is also an interesting position for an academic to take, as academia is perhaps most usually accused of *over*-theorizing artistic pursuits. The transcript of this interview can be found in Addendum E.

### 4.2.1 The author's conception of the writing process

As he was succinct in his description, the author's own words are used to describe his conception of his writing process as a whole:

> …it's like sometimes when you're between books, you're kind of trying to find the right subjects, as well as the right angle, because they kind of go together. Sometimes you find the right subject, but you can't get the right angle, or right place to begin. So I sort of try out different things and sometimes I write stories, or essays, or whatever …as kind of experiments and then sometimes… I guess, I… tend to start something and then it's sort of like Bonsai trees. It sort of grows in this direction and then I trim it, or go back…so…I go forward this way and then I go back to a certain point and then go forward that way and try that out and if that doesn't seem to be working, I go back a bit. There's a kind of tree-like quality to it - the way it evolves and then and I often…go back over the same things until… there's some part of it that seemed right to me and then from that part, I sort of try and make the other parts feel right and once I have a draft, I then actually just go over it, over and over again. I mean, I'll just work on each chapter in a row and often I'll just print it out and then type it all back and do that a couple of times. So it's very sort of recursive and feeds back into itself in all sorts of ways (1).

Coovadia uses the Bonsai as his primary metaphor for his writing process. This is an art form practiced for decorative purposes and the pleasure of contemplation for the viewer and 'the pleasant exercise of effort and ingenuity for the grower' (Bonsai, 2009). This definition mirrors Csikszentmihalyi's hypothesis that 'it is likely that the main raison d'être of art was the same in the Paleolithic era as it is now – namely, it was source of flow[35] for the painter and the viewer' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: 76). It is noteworthy that Coovadia is familiar with the concept of flow (11).

[35] After 8000 interviews conducted all over the world, by himself and colleagues, Csikszentmihalyi (2004) named seven conditions present when a person is in a state of 'flow', regardless of culture or education. Flow happens when your challenges are higher than your usual average and your skills are

When applied to the writing process, this metaphor implies a combination of a highly skilled craftsperson with artistic intentions and the organic growth of a plant, which cannot be entirely controlled. It also implies laborious concentrated effort over an extended period of time tempered by patience and a kind of detached contemplation where natural and artificial processes go hand in hand. As with Orford's metaphor for the creative writing process, there is a sense of balance between what can and what cannot be controlled by conscious effort. There is also the implication of an intention to create something of aesthetic value out of raw material.

At a different stage in the interview, Coovadia said, 'I think that's what writing is, is some kind of constant discovery' (9). Later on, he described writing as also like woodwork. He related how he could not fathom his postgraduate supervisor's interest in woodwork until he had tried it for himself. His description of how it felt reveals a sense of the flow experienced by craftsmen, which leads to a sensation of 'blankness'(11): 'you sand something down and you paint it, or whatever…. There's just lots of little activities and you can do them all reasonably well, because they're quite simple' (11).

In contrast to the other authors in this study, and despite having three novels and other works published, Coovadia appears to be less rather than more confident about his ability to sustain a writing project and the energy it takes to focus on the writing task for intense blocks of time:

> It's been much quicker [writing past books]. My attention used to be much better…. Maybe it was the time before e-mail and stuff, I could pay attention for a long period of time and it made sense to just write for four hours at a time… and now it's more like one, or two hours…and I think, naturally, you just don't have that kind of intensity all the time (2).

When it comes to the difference between writing academically and writing creatively, this is an area on which Coovadia is an expert, writing as he does concurrently on both sides of the academic-creative 'fence' so to speak. He maintains that it is 'much easier to write academically' (2) because with academic writing 'what you're doing is finding out something about the world and…trying to figure out what its logic is and reporting it' and he describes the academic writer's role as being that of simply a 'sophisticated reporter' (2) and writing as merely a 'cleanup process' once the subject has been found, understood and organized (2). The difference with creative writing is the fact that 'with fiction writing, the writing *is* the process' (2).

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higher than your usual average, regardless of what you are doing. When in a state of flow, a person will be:

1. Completely involved in what they are doing – focused, concentrated.
2. Feel a sense of ecstasy – of being outside of everyday reality.
3. Experience great inner clarity – knowing what needs to be done, and how well he is doing.
4. Know that the activity is doable – that her skills are adequate to the task, even if it is difficult
5. Experience a sense of serenity – no worries about oneself, and a feeling of growing beyond the boundaries of the ego (he forgets himself).
6. Feel a sense of timelessness – thoroughly focused on the present, hours seem to pass by in minutes.
7. Be intrinsically motivated – whatever produces flow becomes its own reward.

### 4.2.2 Planning

#### 4.2.2.1 Goal setting and the rhetorical problem

While Coovadia does not provide as detailed an explanation of his writing process goals and method as Orford does, he is no less methodical in some senses, and his method of allowing the emerging text to develop organically through trial and error before getting to a draft that can be repeatedly printed out, reworked and retyped into his computer bears some striking resemblances to Orford's process goals, even if they differ just as strikingly in some significant details of how they go about the planning, transcribing and reviewing processes.

When asked what motivated him to write fiction he replied that he did not know as he has followed 'a really odd career', in which he moved from one book to the next driven by what he describes as getting 'nervous' and feeling that he 'should be doing something' and producing another book because he sees himself as a writer (2). When asked how he feels at the completion of a book, he says something similar: he starts to yearn for the next big project (in other words, a novel), despite having lots of short pieces to write, like essays: 'it's really hard if you're a writer, not to be writing something' (14). In other words, his personal identity as a writer is leads to the process goals that get a new book started.

He cast about for the image to best express his desire to write, first saying that 'it feels like any constructive thing, where you're kind of adding a brick to another brick and…I think… most people feel like that about their professions' (3), then adding that it is like being a scientist and deciding what would be the most interesting topic to investigate out of the material at his disposal: 'what would pay off in some ways and the pay-off, I don't know how to define it - it's not necessarily for an audience, it's not necessarily internal either. It's just some sense of what's fruitful' (3). Perhaps this links to the first phase in the creative process described by Csikszentmihalyi, namely the identification of a problem which is the first step in beginning a new book. As a creative person with a career in creative writing, Coovadia has a fundamental sense of starting a new book itself being a 'problem' he needs to solve by settling on a new topic or theme.

While saying that it is 'hard to say' whether or not, as a scholar and teacher of literature, he is aiming to create 'literature' as opposed to popular fiction (hinting at an ambiguity on his part as to how he would define his work), he does feel this is a bad idea, saying that 'it would be instantly fatal' and he believes this is 'the reason that most academics can't write fiction' (6). However, he pointed out that he cannot make a 'simple separation' between his work as a teacher of literature and his writing process as he is thinking through what makes great literature work as he is teaching it

> because there is a process of…analysis and that is useful, actually as a writer, as well as an academic,…and there's a process of kind of seeing which books survive, like…, if I love a book, I'll read it over and over and over again and only very few books survive that (6).

It is therefore possible that he is trying to create a book that will survive intense analysis and many readings because this is the kind of literature he is steeped in

himself. It is inevitable that his analysis of what makes good literature will permeate his goals for writing in some way, even if this is not a conscious goal.

When asked what he is aiming for in general, later on, he equivocated at first, but then elaborated:

> especially with South African fiction, you just get the feeling that people are just…using words that they borrowed from other books, …and there is just no feeling of, not even reality, but just the thoughts aren't very interesting thoughts, the sensations aren't very interesting sensations, the characters are just sort of not really characters… they're just names. So it's just the sense of … maybe fullness that's not there … which I sort of want, I think (18).

This is strikingly similar to what Margie Orford had to say about fiction in South Africa lacking depth and sophistication.

Coovadia's desire for a more interesting, full style and characterisation is borne out in the complexity and the rich layering of meaning and context in his own novels. *The wedding* and *Green-eyed thieves* span continents in terms of setting and the intricate webs of families and friendships surrounding their main characters and, as he describes Eliot doing, he 'represents a society that is at once highly fragmented *and* highly organized' (Coovadia 2002: 821). Even as he describes the customs, conversation styles, eating habits and so forth of the Muslim characters populating his novels, he manages to create networks of people and relationships that are far from stereotypical or 'representative'; characters who stand apart because of their comically ironic lack of clear self-perception despite detailed observation (as in Firoze, the narrator of *Green-eyed thieves*) and their different, often hypocritical approach to religion and family[36].

When I queried whether he was influenced by George Eliot's realism in her writing of complex social networks, as he has written a paper on this (Coovadia, 2002) he responded that

> Sometimes it's very hard to write a socially complex novel about South Africa, because it's such a weird society and so it's difficult to structure a plot around South African society in an Eliot-type way, but yes. I mean, Eliot's psychological complexity - I just don't see characters in South African fiction with any real - I mean, they have an interesting situation sometimes, but actually, they don't have interesting feelings, or thoughts, or … sensations sometimes (18).

In a 2004 article on *The wedding,* Nirmala Garimella quotes Coovadia saying that he wanted 'to restore the other story – the oddity of the many different kinds of lives that existed under apartheid' (Garimella, 2004), while his South African Muslim Indian characters in *Green-eyed thieves* face the difficulties he experienced himself in America after the September 11 bombing of the Twin Towers. He compares the atmosphere in New York society in this time to '1970s South Africa with these secret

[36] In *Green-eyed thieves,* it is explained that the narrator has not set foot in a mosque since the Salman Rushdie affair as a matter of conscience, but he agrees to go to the mosque in New York with his brother out of fraternal loyalty because this is good for establishing contacts for his fake identity and Green Card scams.

detentions and telephone tapping' and said that there was 'a really belligerent nationalistic tone in America' at that time'[37].

He felt that the strong cultural positioning of his books could make it a lot easier for him to create the brand of social and psychological complexity he desires (18). This appears to be a goal that drives his generation of characters in the sense discussed further in the ideas generation process below, of providing a topic of interest because of their personalities. For example, for his most recent book, *High, low, in-between*, he says he was 'thinking about…what would a kind of representative South African character be like? Not in the sense of economically representative, but kind of spiritually representative' (18).

This theme crosses over or might have led from his previous novel, *Green-eyed thieves*, in which he occasionally unites all South Africans under the banners of Calvinist ideas of sexual morality and a lingering after-taste from Apartheid. There is the sense that there is 'no such thing as an innocent South African', which he states in the context of many ordinary activities being criminalised (such as going to the wrong public toilet or beach for your race group), and this leading to a general sense of criminalisation, as well as the elevation of self-interest and family interests above the community's or country's as a species of acceptable defiance against an inherently corrupt system. This is a use of humour to tackle a serious problem, in a similar vein to Orford's use of the casual sexual pleasure of her main character as her empowering defiance of the post-Apartheid subliminated war on women.

With writing process goals, as he is in salaried employment and does not have to work to strict publishing deadlines the way the other participants do[38], he is able to allow his writing to evolve (1) and then 'if that doesn't seem to be working' he can 'go back a bit….until there's some part of it that seemed right to him and from that part, [he] sort of [tries] to make the other parts feel right' (1) until he has a draft of the whole book. After this, he begins anew the process of revision, thus setting himself the implicit goal of rewriting and reworking his draft until it too 'feels right'. His goal for his writing process could be stated as: exploring a topic that seems fruitful until he can see that it might yield a novel, and then allow this to evolve while writing, based on his intuition and his sense of internal precision that it feels right, until he has a draft. Then rework this draft over and over until the novel is complete.

When it comes to style goals, on the other hand, Coovadia sets his sights on whatever seems 'the most advanced' use of language, 'however [he thinks] language should be' 'at a particular time' (5). However, he may become tired of a particular style and then he is influenced by the books he is reading, which he thinks are 'the most interesting novels, so [he is] interested in language…that has the same sort of intensity…or control' (6). This is reflected in the very different styles of his books, where it would not easy to trace obvious similarities in style between them.

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[37] Green Eyed Thieves – Imraan Coovadia: Identity issues at core of tale about family of con artists. *Cape Times* 2006.

[38] This does not imply that he is not under pressure to produce published work. As a teacher of writing and as an academic in the current South African system, there is a pressure to produce both literary and academic publication output on a fairly regular basis.

Love of language was not necessarily a driving force for Coovadia, who ascertained 'I don't think I really *love* language as such' (9) and compared his feelings towards language to friends of his who are poets who he says 'care about the language' (9) What captures him is 'effects in the language which are interesting, and style is great, and thoughts' (9).

In the programme for the Time of the Writer festival, Coovadia (in University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2007) describes literary influences on style:

> There are any number of writers who have cast a spell over my own writing: Gunter Grass, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Saul Bellow, even William Wordsworth. I often think about the encounters Wordsworth describes with characters like the leech-gatherer in his poem *Resolution and independence* or the imaginary Arab horseman who holds a stone and a shell in the apocalyptic dream in the *Prelude*. I like the fact that these encounters are intensely meaningful without it quite being clear what their meaning is. I can't think of a better definition of interesting writing.

He feels that decisions about style and how a sentence is going to fit together is possibly 'the key' to the whole process and is 'the decision you make all the time' (9). Notwithstanding the importance he attaches to style decisions, even for the distinctive Indian English idiom that sets *The wedding* apart, he did not start out with the explicit intention of capturing this. He declares that it 'was more that once [he] began writing, it just turned out to be a really fruitful and interesting thing to explore' (6).

When the question was posed whether he had a particular audience in mind that influences his writing goals, he says he has 'no idea' who they are and, even more strongly, 'That would just seem stupid, though, wouldn't it?' (6) When I probed further, asking if there was perhaps even an imagined person that he writes to or for, he said 'Maybe like a future person, like a person …who buys your book, or something' (6) which suggests there is, as with Orford, a sense of taking a reader into consideration, without any preconceived notions of who that reader is, but perhaps with some mental construct of what they might want in a book. However, his final response to probing on whether this means he might imagine the influence the book might have on people he says, 'I'm not really sure… I just don't really have a good answer for that question' (6) indicating that a strong sense of writing for a particular audience is, at least to his conscious mind, not very important to his writing process.

His style goals change depending on the novel, although he found it difficult, if not impossible, to remember any of the reasoning behind these choices apart from the fairly obvious ones underlying the use of non standard punctuation in his Indian English style writing in *The wedding* versus his more 'standard'[39] English in his later books. He felt that after three books, which were spaced far apart (*The wedding* was written in the early 1990s) he has not developed some sort of consciously repeatable process or style goals, but rather tailors language to the peculiar needs of a particular writing project (22-23).

[39] As a one-time student of linguistics, I am aware that terms such as 'standard' and 'non-standard' English are highly contested, but do not wish to be distracted by this debate here. I think it is clear what is meant is not 'better' or 'worse' English.

#### 4.2.2.2 Generating

In *The wedding*, the narrator speaks of words as 'flighty, insubstantial creatures…liable to veer from the true state of reality in unexpected directions, like a cloud of swallows breaking across a hillside' (2001: 269). This provides a key to understanding the fiction writing process and the generation of ideas, as reality is transformed into something even the author does not entirely expect. Nonetheless, when it comes to inspiration, it is not so much words as ideas that get Coovadia fired up: 'sometimes [a word will spark off], but it's more often a combination of words, or a perception that you're trying to find the right vehicle for' (9).

When between novels, in order to experiment with ideas for potential books, Coovadia often writes short stories (15). He says the average turn-over time for him to complete a short story or an essay is around two or three weeks, while the easiest of these took five days to write, and one is still on his computer and still is not quite right and while he has not decided to abandon it completely, he has not looked at it for a year (15). He says this process of writing stories in between books began after he had completed his first novel. Judging by the topics of the short stories I have seen, they may perform a function of helping Coovadia explore topics and characters of interest to him while he incubates ideas for his next novel. The association is tangential, however, as these short stories are by no means merely 'practice runs' for a novel. For example, the short story *Composition IV* (Coovadia, 2006) has two Muslim medical doctors in one family as characters, and could be seen as linked to *High, low, in-between*, which has as its main character a Muslim doctor and her family. However, the short story is set in New York while *High, low, in-between* is set in Durban and the family relationships and circumstances are very different.

As with Orford, there are key issues which are particular to his personal interests that emerge as the driving force behind the generation of the details of characterization and plot development. One example he gave was his interest in Islam as a subject (7), while this could be expanded to say it is the theme of Islam in reaction to other cultures encountered in the many worlds in which Islamic immigrants from all over the world find themselves, such as the grandchildren of Pakistani or Indian immigrants to South Africa who emigrate to the United States of America.

Also like Orford, and later John van de Ruit, he sees characters as the vehicle through which moral and philosophical issues are discussed obliquely in a way that the author feels is more interesting to a 'generic' reader than scholarly philosophy (Coovadia) or sociology (Orford). Coovadia explains this difference between writing and philosophy as being a difference in the way, for example, Islam is treated, as a difference in the way the issue is 'posed and then what happens once an issue is posed and how it's written about' and says in fiction this 'just makes it a more interesting thing than a kind of direct statement or a direct analysis' (7).

A passage from *Green-eyed thieves* in which the narrator, Firoze (who aspires to being high-brow), is essentially bemoaning his 'philistine' brother's use of choice literary quotes to seduce a woman, illustrates how Coovadia's knowledge of and interest in literature and Islam as well as the issues of Apartheid South Africa, are transformed into humour and integrated into the development of his characters. This passage gives entertaining insight into both brothers:

> Ashraf is like the next villain when it comes to claiming influences that reek of a disorganized mind – Nietzsche, apparently, the I Ching, the *Far Side* calendar, *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse, the *Kama Sutra*. Meeker minds…were impressed by the dimestore philosophy, which includes his sense of the beast dwelling inside the breast of modern man, his appreciation of the Oriental attitude towards fate the I Ching exemplifies, his identification with Gibran, his love of landscape, his desire to explore the *Sutra*'s contortionist splendours, which he considered his heritage as a son of the dusky continent. Nothing in the list would trouble the pond of a sophomore mind, but not one of these aforementioned works, excepting Gibran, have I observed in my brother's possession…. South Africa…banned girly magazines and relaxed its Calvinism only for works of high literature which boggled the Dutch Reformed morals of the government censor. Calvinists, censors…we Johannesburgers owe them so much in the imaginative sense. I trace my literary bent back to those unexpurgated classics such as Ian Fleming and D.H. Lawrence, which stung our hands with their sexual amperage. …But did Ashraf, as a schoolboy, look beyond the character's pornographic sighs…to a deeper truth of existence? I think not (154-155).

He says his choice of character is sometimes as an entry point into an issue, and gives as an example the characters in *Green-eyed thieves* who he says embodied the different sides of Islam and so, '*were* sort of the issue. You know, they were a way of posing an issue' (7). That said, he is careful to point out that this mirror has two faces and 'the moment you create them…they change the issue and the issue kind of bends around them and becomes less defining….[and] more elusive' (7). This point is echoed by the narrator of *Green-eyed thieves*, who says: 'Does literature not come at things at an angle rather than head on?' (Coovadia, 2006).

As one would expect, friends, family and autobiographical information are sometimes the starting point for the generation of ideas or 'the germs of the characters' (5), but, as Coovadia puts it 'it's always scrambled…you'll take a bit from here, or a piece from there, or you'll use a character and then alter it in some way'(5). The key point is that 'everything has to fit inside the book' (5), in other words, become subsumed by the story. He says he is really worried about some people thinking that certain characters in the book *are* them but he says 'they're not really' (5) as they were more the starting point of the character than true-to-life depictions of people he knows.

While writing his first novel, *The wedding*, Coovadia followed his mother and aunt around with a notebook to capture the cadence of their speech, in addition to reading novels by Indian writers about India, as he felt this had not quite been captured yet (9). This is an example of Csikszentmihalyi's gap in the domain as a source of problems to solve, as the author has identified something missing in the 'Indian' literature he wishes to contribute to, namely the capturing of particular oral forms of Indian English. Coovadia's desire to remedy this is then translated into what Berkenkotter called a style goal.

When asked what he did to generate ideas once he has the kernel of a story, he answered:

> Read a lot, talk to people. You know, write things, short things, poems, basically, just trial and error…endless trial and error. You read the papers…anything which gives you kind of constant input, is useful (3).

In other words, there is some research (through talking to others and reading papers and other books) and creative exploration of ideas (through writing poems, essays and short stories) and a reviewing of these ideas. This suggests that the generation of ideas does form a critical part of the planning process for Coovadia, as Flower and Hayes' (1981) model suggests, as he is using this process as a testing ground for the emerging novel before starting work on a first draft in earnest.

In addition to this exploration, Coovadia says that he keeps a 'mini canon of things [he is] really interested in' with him (7) while he is writing, and unlike the other authors in this study, he keeps a reading project going alongside his writing, elaborating that 'It's sort of exciting to have a reading project' (4) along with the composition of a particular novel. The 'canon' he refers to will ostensibly consist of works he teaches at the University of Cape Town, but it may include other books as well. For example, while he was writing *High, low, in-between*, he says he was 'reading *Lear* [Shakespeare] over and over again, and Tolstoy' (7) whereas when he was writing *Green-eyed thieves* he was reading *Lolita* (Nabokov) and *Invisible man* (Ellison) as well as material on Stockholm Syndrome and diamonds (4 and 7). Sometimes the influence of this reading is evident to the reader, as one reviewer of *Green-eyed thieves*[40] pointed out that, similar to the reader of *Lolita*, the reader cannot help sympathising with and even liking the criminal main characters as one is forced to see the action from their viewpoint. In his acknowledgements for *High, low, in-between* (2009), Coovadia explicitly thanks some authors (without indicating if their help in his writing came through direct interaction with the person or indirect interaction through his reading of their work, with one exception). Among them are Ingrid de Kok and Vikas Swarup, as well as P. H. Mtshali, whom he directly thanks for his work, *The power of the ancestors: the life of a Zulu traditional healer*, which Coovadia used as a reference point for his fictional account of a visit to a Zulu *sangoma* (Coovadia, 2009: 213-216).

Despite the apparent intensity of Coovadia's reading projects, he claims that the reading he does to complement a writing project does not 'feel like research. It was more that I was interested in it and I was writing about it….Often…you're just reading a book and luckily, it will have something in it' (4). When I asked, for example about the source of the intricacies of diamond forgery he describes in *Green-eyed thieves*, he said he had read 'lots of books about crime' and a book by 'some guy who was writing a lot about De Beers and diamonds' but he could not recall the book's title (4).

While Coovadia says he does not consciously use exercises designed to trigger right-brain activity while generating ideas, he thought there was a possibility that he might do this by default, for example, by listening to music while he writes. The fact that he knew that listening to music was one of the possible right-brain activities, without prompting, could indicate that this is a set of writing tools he is aware of but mostly chooses not to use, possibly because this does not fit in with his personal style. He does not elaborate on his reasons for not using these exercises himself, however, so this is speculation on my part.

[40] Green- eyed thieves – Imraan Coovadia: Identity issues at core of tale about family of con artists. *Cape Times* 2006.

Much later on in the interview, when we were discussing assessment of creative writing, he mentioned 'some interesting exercises you can do' which he picked up when he was a tutor of a course at Yale university. This course 'had the most amazing set of exercises, because it had been going since the 1920s and so they had all these amazing kinds of assignments, plus illustrations from literature …[and] those exercises were quite useful' (22). So it is possible that he has internalised and automated some of the techniques used in these exercises over the years and is no longer consciously aware of them, but this is not easily proved.

Coovadia believes that 'what writing is, is some kind of constant discovery' (9) and during the writing process, Coovadia likens the unexpected juxtapositions and discovery inherent in the process to painting a picture, where 'you paint one stroke and you try another one and that one fits'. These surprises are less unexpected for him now, as he is aware that characters with 'integrity' will do 'certain things that make sense' and he has become 'used to the kind of discoveries, the kind of small discoveries you make in writing all the time and they just become part of your everyday apparatus' (9).

He felt that filling in ideas was more difficult than coming up with the original idea, but avoided labelling this part of the process 'difficult' as such, saying, 'I don't know if that's hard. In some ways if you train yourself to observe things and to collect things that are interesting, it's quite easy, it's natural, but it does take up most of the time' (4). What Coovadia says he has 'real trouble' generating is 'a really simple envelope for the whole thing, like the simplest possible structure…that will then, while you are doing it, actually help you'. This form would ideally help organize the ideas he has generated so that it will give him 'a tip-off as to what to do on that particular day, or that week'. His example of a successful form was Vikas Swarup's *Q&A*[41] which has the 'really simple form' of a quiz show, in which the chapters are organized around the individual questions'[42]. Ideally, Coovadia would aim for a form that is 'simple, but also not too mechanical' (4), so style goals as well as process goals are taken into account when generating the form the novel is to take.

#### 4.2.2.3 Organizing

When trying to plan his book's structure, Coovadia says he has tried 'tricks' such as the ones mentioned in my questions on planning before writing, such as storyboarding, drawing a map of the story, etcetera, but that these do not 'work' for him (8). What he feels is more productive is to 'add little notes on the bottom of a Microsoft Word document' as thoughts occur to him or to keep another Word document open which is 'separate from the actual writing' (8). In general, however, he follows the method he described in his analogy of the bonsai tree growing, saying that he writes sequentially, 'this bit and this bit and this bit and then [he goes back and [changes] it' (8) in an organic fashion. Unlike Orford, he does not 'have some clear,

[41] produced as the highly acclaimed film *Slumdog millionaire*

[42] In an interview with a Canadian newspaper, Vikras Swarup (2009) said that this simple quiz show structure, in which the chapters of the book were arranged according to the episodic structure of the quiz show, helped him to write the book in two months, so Coovadia has a good point here.

very clear picture' of what is going to happen in the book, to the extent that he says he has only 'some vague ideas and they never really work out' (8). This is consistent also with his conception of writing as discovery, which cannot be planned in advance.

This is then part of a writing process goal, where he specifically chooses not to plan very much because

> the real thing is [that] while you're actually writing, you want things to occur to you in that particular hour or two that you're writing. If you've been reading a lot about something, the writing will often occur to you, or if it doesn't occur to you, then you go back and then when you come back, it will occur to you (8).

This perhaps expresses an enjoyment of the 'Aha!' moment mentioned by Csikszentmihalyi as part of the creative process, and comes, interestingly, after a period of preparation and incubation of ideas garnered through his reading.

Notwithstanding this aversion to too much organising, Coovadia puts writers' block down to mostly a weakness in the original conception of the book, saying that he does not believe 'that you can get a writers' block two-thirds of the way through a book' and that he thinks writers' block 'happens before you begin a book, or when you're in the first 30 pages' (17). When I remarked that in my reading on the subject there did appear to be some people who were unable to finish books which were already nearing completion, he accounted for this by saying that for him this would be a sign that 'the book as a project is ill-conceived' (17) and admitted that he had tried to write a book that 'just ran out…half way but it was because the book was a disaster' (17) although he did not elaborate on why precisely the book was a disaster. Presumably, in the context of the discussion, it was because of poor initial conception. Perhaps this is a similar phenomenon to what Orford describes when she says that the initial idea for a book has to be strong enough to sustain a year or more of writing, only in Coovadia's case, the time and effort he spends exploring that initial germ of a book is synonymous with planning the book and the generation of ideas and planning are inseparable parts of the discovery process that he conceives writing to be.

### 4.2.3 Reviewing: evaluating and revising

Reviewing the work he produces in his first draft forms the bulk of Coovadia's writing process and he held that out of the approximately four years it takes him to write a novel, eighty percent of the time is revising a draft 'so that it's right' (13). His usual modus operandi if something was not being written well would be to try starting somewhere else, but if it gets really bad and he feels discouraged about the book for more than simply a day or two, he will actually stop writing that particular book altogether and abandon the whole project, as he saw this as a 'sign' telling him that the book is not working (13). When asked how he gets a sense of the writing going well or not he said, '.  I think it's like the same way you know if sometimes you're playing tennis and it's going well, it's a feeling that you're doing what you want to do' (12). In other words this is a 'gut feeling' evaluation of his work that he has learnt to trust over many years as a writer.

He says he works mostly on the level of sentences and paragraphs when revising, but he almost never actually moves a paragraph around. He says he tries to write chronologically. This implies a large amount of organising process happening in his

mind before he transcribes his thoughts. That said, he does mention that he is constantly going forward and then going 'back to some point where it just seems wrong and then [deleting] it' (12).
He felt that poor word choice and sentence structure would probably bother him most while revising, but not in a grammatical sense. Rather, it would be in the sense of fulfilling his style goals to write fresh, unique prose: 'More just like you want sentences that are kind of crisp and interesting' (13). Furthermore, when it comes to local level revisions, he says: 'often it will just be things like deleting or adding in articles and definite articles…or just seeing that a sentence doesn't seem, feel kind of right, it doesn't have the right tension' (13). Rather than delete a paragraph that is not working, he says he is 'much more likely to use it as a starting place for getting it right' while revising it' (14). He says that checking for little errors is something he does as he writes and for him it is 'part of writing'(16), so this is something he has in common with Beake but which differs from Orford's method of revising only once she is in a particular stage of writing. As with generating and organising, this shows a highly integrated sense of the writing process in which he completes many tasks together rather than in clearly delineated stages.

Like the other authors, Coovadia works through 'dozens and dozens' of drafts (13) and says he sometimes works on the screen, but occasionally he also prints out drafts and reads through them, trying to 'zero in' (13) on what he thinks needs changing. He says that occasionally he scribbles notes onto the printouts, but it seems that his most usual form of revising in this manner is to read the printout, then type the changes out on screen. He says in this sense he is 'an extremist' (13), which is possibly in recognition of the fact that this way of working might seem unusual to some other writers. Unlike Orford and Beake, he does not save drafts of his novels once they have gone into print (14)[43].

Coovadia has an agent, a publisher and writing friends, but they do not help him with his writing (17) and he is not particularly interested in what others have to say about his writing (4) or does not really know what to do with their comments (16).
He does not seem to take this position out of arrogance but because of his strong sense that 'there's some kind of precision that you have internally that nobody else has' (4).

The first person to read his completed books since the first one was published, is his agent, as with Orford and Beake. After this, the book must, like any other, go through an editor, but unlike the other authors, Coovadia asserts that his editors have 'very little' effect on the completed book (16) and he likes it this way, saying that he 'went out of [his] way on this book [*High, low in-between*] and on the previous one [*Green-eyed thieves]* just to choose an editor who wouldn't interfere' (16). When I queried why he did not like this interference, he held that he did not know 'what to do with it, really' because, after working on the book for three or four years it has a 'permanence' to it and has 'glued shut' in his mind. Once he has reached this stage, he

[43] In this sense he is similar to internationally famous author Terry Pratchett (The annotated Terry Pratchett file v9.0 – Words from the Master, 2003), who said, 'I save about twenty drafts – that's ten meg of disc space – and the last one contains all the final alterations. Once it has been printed out and received by the publishers, there's a cry here of "Tough shit, literary researchers of the future, try getting a proper job!" And the rest are wiped.' Fortunately, Coovadia did not display quite the same vehemence to this lack of hoarding the evidence of previous drafts of a book.

says he finds it very difficult 'to open that again', and so he will respond to an editor's comment such as 'This isn't clear' by adding in 'a paragraph, or a scene… but it's very minimal' (16). This request for a response from an outside editor seems to give him the biggest trouble, as he repeated later on that he 'just [finds] it hard to respond' (16).

This indicates that like Orford he has a 'megalomaniac vision' (cf. Chapter Three) for his book, but unlike her, and the other participants in this study, once he is ready to share the book with its first readers, he feels the book is essentially complete and intact and he does not enjoy the to-and-fro process of continuing to review and revise the text. His internal sense of precision and his finely tuned sense of his own language accuracy, as well as his constant revising of his work, might possibly account for his not feeling the need for external comment on what to him is an entirely finished product. Another factor might be his aversion to the assessment of creative writing (22) born out of his creative writing teaching experiences, but this is speculation on my part.

A remarkable divergence from this apparent lack of interest in what others have to say about his writing came later on in the interview, when we were discussing training or advice he had received on writing and he related how his father was the first person to read the early chapters of his first novel, *The wedding*. Apparently his feedback was that there was 'no dialogue in it' and he pointed out that 'it's so nice when you're reading a book, there's dialogue because…it just feels easier to look at than a page without dialogue' (19). Clearly this feedback was incorporated into the writing of the book, as it is difficult to imagine *The wedding* without dialogue in it. This interchange leads me to conjecture that Coovadia might have taken on board more outside commentary on his first novel than on subsequent ones.

Perhaps, as might be expected for a man as steeped in literature and the language arts as Coovadia, he turns when he needs to make evaluations of his writing and judgment calls on revisions, not to people, style guides or dictionaries, but to other works of fiction (16).

### 4.2.4 Translation and the impact of physical environment and translation tools as situational variables

When it comes to translating his thoughts, Coovadia is an out and out computer-based writer. He had said in a previous interview that he likes his computer because it has 'an infinite supply' of 'untouched, serene' blank pages (McNulty, 2008). He has a laptop, but says he prefers writing mostly in his apartment's study on his desktop computer, 'I think because it fits into a routine. It's on a table and I just sit there. I mean, I have a laptop, but… it's nice to just have the same thing that you do all the time' (10). He says he never writes longhand and he prefers to write at home rather than at his University of Cape Town office.

When he needs to write notes, he uses footnotes or separate documents open simultaneously on the computer. Like Orford and Van de Ruit, he uses standard Microsoft Word software.

He says that on a good day he types around two hundred words, which he says anyone can do in an hour (10). I felt this was very few words for an experienced writer, but

when I cross checked with him after the interview he replied, 'I meant 200. Just two hundred. I am very slow!!! But I think of myself as very fast.' This could link to his internal precision and my earlier conclusion that he probably conducts much of his organising and other planning activities in his head before translating onto the page. This would account for his not needing to write rough notes of any kind before translating and his 'chronological' method of writing. It also accounts for why he can only work for short periods as this process implies very intense levels of concentration and memory, which could potentially be eased by the rough hand-written preliminary notes and sketches the other authors use. However, as discussed below, much of this thought is happening in a state of flow, below the level of conscious thought.

While he did not feel it was particularly important to his writing, he agreed that he was a fast and fluent typist and did comment that no-one can write as fast as they type, so perhaps speed of translation is important to him if only in the sense of ease of translation of his thoughts onto the computer(14). When I tried to probe by rephrasing the question to see if he thought a slower speed would get in the way of his writing process, his answer was noteworthy as it was yet another example of entering into a state of flow or blankness:

> I don't find writing as such, hard, because I don't feel like my mind is always engaged. It almost seems like it sort of happens in your fingers a lot of the time. You know, it's not like a conscious searching a lot of the time. Well, not all the time, so that's why it's sort of possible for me, I think. I think if I had to actually concentrate all the time, had to really be conscious, it would be very, very hard (10).

While he feels as if this is an example of writing from his subconscious, he also made the pertinent point that when he speaks, he also does not know what he is going to say before he says it so the writing does not come from a unique part of his mind, but rather is 'the same kind of…unconscious or hidden source' (11).

He has a large, attractive shiny black flat monitor standing on a fashionable trestle desk with its slim keyboard, and the central processing unit is on the floor so the appearance of his desk is actually strikingly like Orford's with her minimalist laptop. The room has a wall of books on the one side and the desk is, like Orford's, situated in front of a panoramic view of Lion's Head[44]. There is a large wall hanging with Hindi writing on it, which he came across in India (24) and a carved wooden box which looks like it is from the Far East, sitting open on the window sill with a few ballpoint pens resting on its satin lining. A few more books are propped up on the same window sill by a lovely pair of Chinese-looking horse's head book ends. In the sense that his space is an expression of his personal interests and tastes as well as the international but fairly Asian-dominated themes of his writing it supports Csikszentmihalyi's ideas on the importance of a personalized space to a creative individual, even if Coovadia did not acknowledge the significance of anything in the room.

It is hard to say much about his current space and its impact on his writing because he has only been living there for a year and his last book was completed a year and a half

[44] In fact, Coovadia lives in the same part of Cape Town as Orford, and they have different views of the same mountains.

ago, something I only realized after the interview. When I queried this, he replied that he was not sure if he has a 'usual space' for writing in, or if he has 'ever really had the space [he] wanted, or that [he] even knew what [he] wanted in a space' but that he does know 'more now' what he wants. Also, he did not feel the space in which he wrote or his writing materials had any more impact on his writing process than that described above, so it best not to read too much into things. It is worth mentioning however that the space was tidy, uncluttered aesthetically pleasing space, neither sterile and monastic nor full of crumpled pages and piles of notebooks. It was a space that spoke of a particular individual's interests and in particular reflected his love of reading. He says what he loves particularly about his study is the view of the mountains, so perhaps it has the magical combination Csikszentmihalyi mentioned of majestic views for inspiration, and familiarity and personalized comfort for the more routine work of the writing process. He also mentioned at another stage of the interview that he has his routine of the computer in the same place, which ties in with Csikszentmihalyi's ideas on these situational variables.

Coovadia has 'lived in London, Melbourne, Boston and New York – but always in Durban as well' (where he was born) and says he has 'gone through phases of feeling half South African and half American, but these fractions have now changed' (Umuzi Press, 2009a). His nomadic life and a sense of Islamic families in diaspora is reflected in all of his books, for example, *The wedding* is set in Bombay, Durban and New York, while the characters in *Green-eyed thieves* move between South Africa, Pakistan, New York, and other towns in the USA. His latest novel, *High, low, in-between*, is set in KwaZulu-Natal, but its heroine, Nafisa's son has experiences around the world as a photographer.

When it comes to music, he has a selection on iTunes consisting of a lot of classical music, and other 'random bands' (24) and he has a predominance of music with words rather than without (I was interested because some books on stimulating creativity or writing claim you should listen to music without words). He says one of his favourite bands at the moment is Duke Spirit and he likes Bach piano music too. Like John van de Ruit's *Spud* series, which is discussed in Chapter Six, there is sometimes a strong sense of a soundtrack to Coovadia's *Green-eyed thieves* and Firoze's knowledge of and references to music ranging from Gilbert and Sullivan to classical piano pieces in particular seems to reflect Coovadia's eclectic musical collection and a wide-ranging knowledge of music.

### 4.2.5 The significance of taking breaks

Before being asked about taking breaks, Coovadia had already mentioned that 'if it's really going badly, [he will] just stop for a while' (3), indicating the likelihood that for him, as for Orford, a break can be part of a problem-solving process. However, when asked more specifically if breaks are taken when he hits a problem while revising a text, he did not articulate a clear reason for taking breaks at first:

> It's hard to say now, because, you know, there's my computer and then there's email in the background and…your Internet browser and iTunes and stuff, so it's like that sort of mechanism of like taking breaks, is just part of the whole thing and I don't know why I do it when, why I decide to (14).

After some more probing though, he came back to the breaks as being signalled by his snagging on a particular problem, saying

> it actually just works kind of nicely into the whole thing. You know, it's like I'll get to the middle of a page and I'll think, "Okay, well, I don't know" and do something else a few minutes' (14).

He couldn't be pressed for more details on what signals the need to take a break, saying that it is prompted by 'a random feeling' (14). What he does during breaks is mundane daily tasks like check email or iTunes and make cups of tea, in a similar fashion to the other participants in this study as well as the participants in Csikszentmihalyi's.

When asked if the intensity of writing ever gets to him, and signals the need for a break from the process, he felt this was not the case and explained that he really likes this intensity. When he was finishing *High, low, in-between,* he enjoyed 'revising twelve hours a day' for three or four months and that this intensity was 'good' (14). Despite this enjoyment of the intensity of the writing process, he also said that he used to work for an average of four hour stretches in the morning, but now only works for about two (14). The reason he gave for this shorter attention span was his growing older and less able to maintain longer periods of intense concentration.

I was curious as to whether Coovadia, like Donald Murray or Dorian Haarhoff, ever intentionally used his position as a creative writing teacher as part of his writing process. However, he held that he never makes use of his work as a creative writing teacher at the University of Cape Town to workshop or discuss an evolving piece of writing with his students, as he feels this is a waste of their time and he is not that interested in what anyone else has to say about his work now that he is more experienced as a writer (4). This is not a declaration of arrogance but rather a strong sense of already knowing what he wants to achieve because 'there's some kind of precision that you have internally that nobody else has' (4).

### 4.2.6 The impact of the domain and field

#### 4.2.6.1 Knowledge of the domain: skills and training

Coovadia has a wealth of knowledge of the domain of the word as a lecturer of literature and creative writing, with excellent access to books, the Internet and ideas. However, considering the amount of time Coovadia has spent in creative writing departments with other teachers of creative writing, both conducting, tutoring and taking creative writing courses, he had very little to say about what skills he had learnt from these courses. This could be because these skills, like the exercises involving reading works of literature and listening to music, have all become second nature over the years and he is at this stage barely conscious of employing them. For example, when asked about the influence of J.M. Coetzee on his writing skills, as he took Coovadia for an undergraduate credit course, he says that, like himself, Coetzee is not 'very engaged as a teacher' and the only major piece of valuable advice he credits Coetzee with is the dictum to write for four hours a day in the morning (20). This was apparently based on what Coetzee himself does. 'That's about the most important thing you can tell anybody' Coovadia asserts (20).

Coovadia maintained that the most important skill he has as a writer is trying to be an independent thinker. As he elaborated on his answer, he said it was perhaps more that he is 'surprised by how indirect people are…how little it matters to most writers or most people around me to get to…a point of some kind' adding that he feels very strongly about this despite believing that he is intrinsically 'quite an indirect person…and an indirect writer' himself (17). The essence of what he was aiming to describe was his 'hatred of fuzziness, vagueness and unnecessary indirectness, which are probably kind of character-logical things' (17). In other words, he felt one of his most important attributes as a writer that he has the internal sense of precision described earlier.

After making the assertion that this particular ability to be precise is something inherent in his personality, he softens his position by adding that 'there is definitely an element of …if you do something for ten or fifteen years, you just develop certain habits' (18) and these habits and skills become 'highly automated'. He feels that 'Ninety percent or ninety-five percent is learning by doing and changing' (19) but there are also some 'really essential' things that other people will tell you that will send you off on a completely different trajectory to the one you would have gone on if left to your own devices. He felt he learnt his skills mostly on his own by simply writing but the skills he picked up from other people were also crucial elements of his training.

The people he is referring to do not appear to be simply creative writing teachers but also friends and family, as in the example of his father's input on his use of dialogue in his first novel. Often, he says, 'it's just the simplest thing that someone will tell you' that makes all the difference, and 'you have to listen' (19).

Coovadia describes his spelling ability as 'good' and says of his grammatical ability: 'I think it's fine, but people sometimes tell me I use…off-standard grammar sometimes' but that he isn't very aware of and does not really care about what these deviations are(13). He says he does not pay this any attention at all (13), and cannot remember ever making a spelling mistake, as for him this is a completely automated skill (13).

Like Orford, Coovadia feels writers take time to develop and says it is a serious occupation that he feels no one would want to take on until they are in their 20s. This is because 'there's so much to read, think and be curious about before you start writing' (22). When it comes to training creative writers, he says 'creative processes ultimately just need confidence and energy… so it seems worth it just allowing people to write and having some interesting exercises you can do' to get the writing process stimulated (22).

#### 4.2.6.2 Knowledge of and access to the field

As with the other authors, there is evidence of a certain naivety about the publishing industry at first which gradually evolved into confident interactions with familiar publishers and agents after the publication of the first book.

Coovadia describes his publishing career as 'really odd' as he wrote his first novel when he was about twenty two years old, but apparently no-one liked it 'for about five

years' and only then did a publisher accept it. After the publication of this book, he felt that he had 'better write another one' but he describes this as a 'disaster' because 'everybody hated it'. After this he wrote *Green-eyed thieves*, which did well (3). Now, at the time of the publication of his third novel, *High, low, in-between,* he says he does not feel there would be any trouble for him to find a publisher for any future books at this stage (20), perhaps verifying what Orford said that once you have published one or two books in South Africa, as long as you keep producing work of reasonable quality you will get published again.

On whether knowledge of the publishing industry is important to him, however, he said it had 'never, ever, ever' been important to him (21) but that he did find it convenient to be living in Cape Town and be 'friends with [his] publisher' as well as good friends with the person who designed his latest book cover. He felt that 'you probably need to be a lot savvier than I am, [and] a lot more interested in agents and publishing and where to publish' if you were to be 'really successful' although he was unsure about this, adding 'or maybe not' (21). He said he had always felt that if you just wrote well, 'it would be fine' (21) implying a faith in the publishing industry looking for quality of writing as a key criteria for the selection of manuscripts.

Coovadia got an agent after the publication of his first book but did not offer a reason for this other than that you 'just have to as a writer' (21) giving a sense once more that after so many years some of this understanding of the field might have become more automated and less conscious.

### 4.2.7 Personal relationships as situational variables

When asked how his work as a university lecturer affected his writing process he responded that he 'just can't concentrate that much on writing' and said that it is 'actually kind of a relief….to have other things to do' (20) and, like many of Csikszentmihalyi's research participants, he felt that university life can be stimulating and '…also being part of University is … widely interesting and you run into books and ideas and stuff and it's hard to imagine being without the ideas' (21). Moreover, he does not have the anxiety of feeling his livelihood depends on how his next book does on the market because he has a salary (21) and has other concerns to keep him occupied. However, he says that being on committees and so forth 'does take away the intensity of being a writer' at times.

Coovadia lives alone and his job allows him the flexibility to work at home in the mornings if he wishes to write, so he can work uninterrupted. When sent an early draft of this chapter for comment, Coovadia added that 'relationships DO have an impact. Often because I have to screen them out to get anything done, just because I write at home.'

# Chapter Five: Lesley Beake
# Puzzles of places and people

*Song of Be*[45]

*The smoke in the flames*
*of the fires of Bushmanland.*
*The honey-gold of the grass*
*and the wind singing through.*
*The scent of sweetness on the air*
*and the soft, grey dust*
*- before our footsteps*
*were blown out.*

(Beake, 1991)

## 5.1 Author background and publishing history

Lesley Beake has lived in various towns all over South Africa, Namibia, Scotland, the Arabian Gulf, Hong Kong and Oxford, England. She was born and raised in Scotland and came to South Africa with her parents at the age of 16. She trained as a teacher at Rhodes University and UNISA and taught in South Africa and the Persian Gulf (Heale, 1994).

When one of her first books, *The strollers,* won the 1987 Young Africa Award for children's literature, followed by the Sir Percy Fitzpatrick Award for best children's book in 1988 (Beake, 2008), her literary career was launched. She has since published over seventy five books for adolescents and children, some of which have been translated into a number of European and African languages as well as Japanese. *The strollers* remains, two decades after its first imprint, a perennial favourite with school children, and has seen around thirty-three reprints (7). The substantial 'awards and honours list' on Beake's website includes *Song of Be*'s selection as both a Notable Children's Book (1993) and a Best Book for Young Adults (1994) by the American Librarian's Association, a gold medal for Best Children's Book in English by the Namibian Children's Book Forum in 1995, and nominations in 2004 and 2005 by the South African Children's Book Forum for the Hans Christian Anderson Award and the Astrid Lindgren Award in Sweden. Further accolades for her writing include winning a trip to Turkey and Israel as a prize for the Fair Lady Travel Writing competition and being voted Cosmopolitan Woman of the Year in 1989 (Beake, 2008).

[45] This song appears on pages 2 and 75 of *the Song of Be*, sandwiching the story. It captures sense of place and her style as well as a sense of capturing footprints from the past as she does in *Song of Be, Hap* and *Cageful of butterflies*, and even *Strollers* – telling young people's stories and contexts. It is further evocative of her passion for history and archaeology and her fascination with the traces that people leave behind.

She has been both editor and contributor of four travel magazines, and for a period of ten years, she 'wrote articles for most of South Africa's top magazines, including *Fairlady*, *Femina…*and *Cosmopolitan*', and contributed as a correspondent from Namibia and as a travel writer for almost five years to the radio programme *Woman's World* (later *Woman Today*) (Beake, 2008).

Her combination of experience in the fields of both creative writing and teaching have helped her build a solid reputation as a commissioned writer of readers for young children and adolescents in South Africa, and she has written readers for Maskew Miller Longman, Macmillan, UNICEF and Cambridge University Press (Beake, 2008). In addition, she has published a picture book, *Home now*, which has been widely translated.

### 5.2 Discussion of interview

The interview was conducted in the loft-style study of Beake's Simon's Town home, where she does much of her writing. In preparation for the interview, *Song of Be* (1991), *A cageful of butterflies* (1989), *The strollers* (1987), *Bau and the baobab tree* (1992), *Home now* (2000?) and *Jakey (1997)* were read. References are also made to *Serena's story* (1990), *Merino* (1989) and *Rainbow* (1989). During the interview, Beake gave me a copy of one of her latest readers, *The message* (2009) as it is somewhat difficult to get hold of readers outside of the school system. She also loaned me her writing file with drafts of her manuscript for *Hap* as we spoke about this book during the interview but it will probably only be on sale in 2012.

The transcript of Beake's interview can be found in Addendum F. The interview was recorded in two parts with an extended coffee break in between. The transcripts are labeled 'part one' and 'part two' and references to the transcript are numbered so that a page number appearing on its own refers to part one of the interview, whereas a reference such as (2: 13) indicates page 13 of part two of the transcript.

#### 5.2.1 The author's conception of the writing process

As with the other authors, the analysis of Beake's interview is prefaced by her own description of her writing process. However, it is critical to mention that she has two kinds of books that she writes and different starting points, as will be elaborated on further under 'goal setting' below. The one kind consists of commissioned stories intended as readers for young children and adolescents, which are marketed to Education departments and schools rather than book sellers, while the others were written for the author's own reasons, stemming purely from personal inspiration. The commissioned books follow a slightly different writing process from the others, as in the latter case the author has to make her own decisions about crucial factors such as her intended audience and topic, the scope of the book and deadlines for completion.

However, as her big books require a serious investment of time and energy, she has also learnt to think 'quite a lot' before starting a project such as *Remembering green*, and here she decided 'rather than just write something, let's think a little about the market' and so chose global warming 'as a kind of theme and set it in the future, which is very unusual for [her]' (24-25).

It must be stressed that this does not mean Beake's educational books follow some formula handed out by publishers or that they are less creative or have less energy put into them than her personally initiated books. She is still in charge of choosing characters, themes, style and content and does not in this sense 'write to order'. The principle difference is the specificity of the audience and the amount of risk involved[46]. When she began her discussion of the writing process, it was difficult to ascertain which process she was referring to exactly, but it appears that she was mostly describing the process of beginning to write one of her educational books. This claim is based on the fact that her other books appear to be conceived of in a different way, beginning not so much with a sense of place or landscape, as she described below, but rather stemming from her personal passions for topics and people, as will be discussed in the following section.

When Beake is commissioned to write a book of a specific length for a specific audience, she describes her writing process as starting 'with a landscape'. She does this partly to make each book unique, saying she might think to herself 'Well, I haven't written anything about the Eastern Cape for a while" but also because she feels this element of place is 'really missing in a great many books that are written' and 'we've got…stories with African children in them and sort of moderate backgrounds which mention that it's happening in Soweto… but we don't get the feeling of what it's really like to be in Soweto' (2).

After the emergence of a landscape, she says that what usually happens next 'is that a voice just starts talking (I write a lot in the first person) and [that] voice will say something like: 'It was very cold in the morning when we went to get the paint.' Sometimes she says she will 'think, 'girl' or 'boy'' for the narrator, but also sometimes this also 'just happens' After this she says 'the story just sort of comes out' (2).

When asked why place is so central to her process, rather than characters (which was the starting point for the other authors) she responded:

> I think it sets some of the parameters in advance. If it's going to be, let's say, set in a large township, there's a noisier feel to the story and if it's going to be in a small village in the Eastern Cape where most of the people have gone to the towns to look for work, it's already going to start with a melancholy and almost nostalgic feel to it. So just having the place really sets the tone of the story, as well as a lot of the other things (3).

However, in answer to how she begins one of the books that is completely hers from its inception, she also said later on that 'you have to have a passion about what you're writing about' (11?). The strong sense of landscape she expresses reflects her declaration on her website (Beake, 2008), that:

> All of my books are rooted in Africa and the essence of this continent. Whether they are for very young readers, or for teenagers, they express my love of the landscape and the places that I care about and reflect the experiences I have shared with children here

[46] When reading a final draft of this chapter, Beake clarified the difference further: 'Educational books have more initial structure - number of words, reading level and sometimes topics, but there is always freedom of interpretation. Trade books [written for the open market and available in bookshops] are much freer (and much more of a risk) as writers have to put in a huge amount of effort *before* a publisher will consider it' (Beake, 2010, emphasis Beake's).

> during the forty years since my family emigrated from Scotland. As a teacher, I was able to move around South Africa and experience first-hand the differences between the Western and Eastern Capes, the mountains of Natal and the beaches of the Wild Coast, the rural farming regions and the urban inner cities.

Beake's characters, rooted in places, could stem from her own experience as an immigrant leading a fairly nomadic life and therefore very conscious of place and it is interesting to note that her home has a sign outside it that reflects the title of her picture book *Home now*, perhaps echoing this concern for claiming a place of belonging.

The first part of the interview did not cover more than the start of Beake's process as we moved on to a discussion of the differences between writing a personal book with an uncertain market versus educational publishing which allows her to make a living, and this detail slots in better in the breakdown of the writing process as described in the rest of the interview analysis below.

### 5.2.2 Planning

#### 5.2.2.1 Goal setting and the rhetorical problem

Beake's readership is always clearly defined, in stark contrast to the other participants in this study. Her first rhetorical problem in her fiction writing appears to be writing for a particular age group. This is something she is as passionate about as she is about the messages she wants to convey with her choices of themes or any other overarching goal that drives her writing process. The choice of adolescents as her audience dominates all her goals for content, style, word choice, and even the number of words per chapter, the overall length of paragraphs and the length of a completed book. This is true of both her commissioned and personally conceived books.

After our interview, Beake emailed me to say that she had been thinking during the night about something she had not said during the interview. As she felt this was essential to understanding her writing process, it is related here. One of the most critical aspects of writing for her particular audience is

> how important respect for *children* is in writing. I think they are immensely brave – and all the characters in my books, I think, represent that. They cope with everything that adults have to handle – often to a much greater degree – while simultaneously handling the huge challenges of growing up and adolescence.
>
> The end of primary school, which is where I am happiest visualizing my readers, is the end of innocence in many ways (without any illusions about their sexuality at that time). And that's for privileged children with families and homes. It's where reality hits home with a vengeance. Maybe one of the few rituals that exist here is the one where girls stop wearing that incessant pink and move into other colours. In fact…There's a book there! But I think that at this age, writers can achieve more, if the books work, than at any age. It is a contact point where their minds are still open to new ideas and still…Well, just open.
>
> That's why the first person is so effective. They can really hear what the characters say, and it makes everything so much more direct (Beake, 2009b).

In the interview, when I commented that teenagers are often wonderfully idealistic, Beake said, 'That's why I write for them, because they're ready for ideas then' (22).

It can be deduced from this email and interview excerpt that Beake's goal in writing for adolescents is to achieve an acceptance of new ideas and to make an impression on and perhaps change the minds of her readers for the better. In this sense, she has perhaps not ever relinquished her role as a teacher. A clue as to the ideas that drive her writing is given on her home page, where she writes that she believes 'in the universality of children's experience' and in children's ability 'to comprehend these similarities and to see the connections that truly exist between different cultures and different worldviews.' She also declares her belief that the way to bring these issues to the attention of young people 'is through the most powerful medium of all…the written word.' She proclaims that if she had only one wish for herself, it would be that she 'could have the ability to write books that make those connections' (Beake, 2008). This is a laudable undertaking and a challenging one, as the age range for which she writes most of her fiction is notorious among language teachers for giving up reading fiction for pleasure.

There is evidence that she has succeeded in her goals. As far afield as the USA, readers have reported positive reactions to books such as *Song of Be*. One Assistant Professor of English children's and adolescent literature and former president of the Texas Council of Teachers of English explains this book's appeal as follows:

> First, the historical background necessary to understand the book, although not common, is neither extensive or [sic] arcane. Second, in spite of the alien, even exotic setting, the experiences in the book are recognizably those of an adolescent emerging from childhood's conspiracy of silence about her past and her family's past into knowledge of her own personal history, her culture's history, and her cultural identity. These experiences are quite similar to those of adolescent protagonists in many American novels…. Be is buffeted by adolescent challenges that are, in their way, just as common to American teens: defining who she is, particularly in relation to her family and her culture.... This motif is a familiar one in YA[47] fiction, and one which readers can readily identify with (Yearwood, 1997: 1-5).

Beake has identified many of the struggles teenagers face, including rejection 'on many, many levels' by society and says she thinks 'being a teenager in a Western society based community is appalling' as there is 'no initiation or feeling of change of status. Just…this kind of slide out of being cute into being something that's …quite feared' (22-23). As she points out, there are no significant rituals for many teenagers until they have, if they can afford it, a large party at 16, 18 or 21 years old. Beake has spent enough time in African communities which have special rituals to help bridge the transition from childhood to adolescence for the child and the community, to know there are better ways of dealing with this universally difficult transition and her acknowledgement of this intensely experienced watershed in young people's lives could mean her books give her readers a sense of being understood as they explore this through the eyes of a different character in a first person narrative.

Beake's writing provided an escape from her previous role in the domain of the word: teaching under Apartheid's oppressive and separatist education system and it provided her with a place to show children more open minded values through indirect but powerful means in books. While not overtly political in nature, her books carry values

[47] Young Adult

and attitudes towards race, culture and even religion that would not have been tolerated in adult fiction under Apartheid. When I commented that some of the ideas expressed in her books written during the 1980s would have been banned in adult literature at the time, she said she felt that children's books were 'very much in advance of adult books in terms of principles' and agreed that their not being censored was probably because they were not taken seriously by the authorities.

However the books did have an impact and she was able to fulfill her goal of creating awareness about the plight of street children into schools by talking to some of her young readers. She went to a boy's school where the boys were completely disinterested in the challenges faced by street children until she gave them, 'a complete talking to' and they 'subsequently raised R300 [for the street children], which was quite a lot in those days' and so her books were also an entry point for her to raise awareness among privileged children about the situations faced by disadvantaged ones. Now she says some schools in the Cape Flats see *The strollers* as part of their cultural history, while many children in the Western Cape 'relate to that book very, very strongly and they do things like write sequels for the book' (6) so its role has changed in unexpected ways over time. One thing that is certain though, is that it is fulfilling her goal of reaching diverse young readers and raising awareness and hopefully also comprehension and compassion.

Her interaction with her South African audiences seems to have led to fresh writing goals. *The strollers* has an ambiguous ending, which Beake says she regrets a little now that she has seen so many children's responses to it, where they seem hungry for a happier, better resolved ending. While she says she does not believe you can entirely 'tie up' the ending of a story, 'children of that age really, really want you to and you can't ignore that' (7). For this reason, while *Song of Be* (1990) is a tragic story that starts with a young San girl having pierced her thigh with a poisoned arrow, 'it had to have a happy ending' (7). She continues to work with the community that inspired this book and said what has happened to these people '*is* a tragedy' so individual happiness has to appear somewhere in the book' (7). The goal of uplifting young readers and fulfilling her responsibilities to them now underlies all her writing as she declares: 'my belief is that writing for children, and particularly for teenagers, cannot have a tragic ending. I don't believe it should have' (7).

She agreed that happy endings in youth literature foster a sense of optimism, which is a survival skill, saying: 'there's a kind of school of "gritty" books where practically everybody's dead in the end and there's not much hope for those that are left and what's the point of reading that, for a child ?....why should they have to cope with total alienation in a story?' (7).

While she feels that children can learn 'the realities of street life' through stories, and her books, including *Song of* Be and her new book, *Hap* do not shy away from sex, she treats these questions with sensitivity and intentionally leaves out questions such as prostitution among young people, feeling that, while the children involved or 'being exploited are ten to twelve' years old, 'for a novel for children across the board, it's too much for them to cope with' (7). Thus she makes a distinction sometimes between who she is writing *about* (a very specific group) and who she is writing *for* (a much larger spectrum of children). People have told Beake that she ought to rewrite *The strollers* and put the sex in but she has no intention of doing this

'for that age group' of readers (7). In setting content goals for her writing she has learnt to trust her own judgement rather than indiscriminately taking on board what other adults believe.

However, this does not mean there is no room for her more personal interests. *Hap*, a book which is comes out in the UK in 2012, is described by Beake as 'an archaeological book, because [she is] really interested in archaeology' (11). While her concern for dogs had to be suppressed when she volunteered to work in displaced San communities in the Kalahari as part of her research for *Song of Be* and other books, she did manage to bring this intense love for dogs into other books, such as Maxwell in *Merino*, who was apparently her dog (2: 16).

When it comes to writing style goals, the process is very different for Beake's writing for wine magazines and web sites and her writing of readers or other books aimed at children up to the age of 15. She thinks 'it comes from the same places, but the first thing is the language level, which changes the story' (8). Beake has learned to 'write for levels of language' as well as for the psyche of particular age groups and is adamant that 'there is no patronization' in this but that

> if you know that your audience is, let's say, Grade 5s throughout the country and you've been to schools as I do a lot, then you know what your language level is and you also respectfully consider that a lot of those children are speaking English as their second, third, or even fourth language, so automatically, the –not the tone – but the level of words you can use…and also things like word play and being clever with language just go out the window, because it's one step too far for your audience (8).

So while she finds it 'more playful to write for an adult audience' because the writer can make assumptions about their ability to understand a pun or indirect, inferential language and humour and they have more background knowledge on a subject, she feels that when she is writing for children, from the outset she has to 'go straight to the story' and not 'ramble around too much' (9).

I explored one example of style choice: a use of unusual syntax which stood out in a few of her books, 'tall she was,' in order to see how she makes decisions on style at this level in keeping with her goals. While she was able to articulate reasons why she might be doing this, it appears that these decisions are automated rather than conscious. She felt she might be using this syntax as a device to make 'the story slow down…after exciting bits…to change the pace' but that it could also perhaps be 'a remembering mode' where a character is 'thinking aloud about a person, because when people are remembering…often, if you ask them to remember something, they won't look at you…they'll look at something and they'd say something like, "Tall he was"' but she says this is something that 'just happens' and she is 'not that clever', meaning that she is not making this a conscious goal to express a particular way of seeing things, but rather making up some aspects of style as she goes along to suit the needs of the developing text (2: 6).

Like the other authors, Beake sets herself a goal of being true-to-life in her use of language, in particular dialects, going to schools, observing children there and listening to them talk in order to 'think herself into that and to think what would they say' and 'think your way into the life of the person' (18). Even with comparisons she

is careful not to make any 'children wouldn't have had' themselves, giving the example of her San character, Be, saying 'It felt like silk' which she says 'would be rubbish, because where would she ever have felt silk?' She always bears her character's authentic reference points in mind. When it comes to using slang and words from other languages to add regional flavour to a character's speech, Beake aims to stick to what she knows, because 'dialogue is terribly difficult to do'. With books set in the Cape, such as *The strollers*, she says she could use the slang and some Afrikaans words because she has lived in the Cape for a long time and speaks Afrikaans, but she 'wouldn't attempt to do it in the other languages' of the country (18).

Over time, she has altered her style goals to suit the changing expectations of teenagers, saying that her reading of the popular *Northern Lights* trilogy by Phillip Pullman[48], which she says she 'absolutely loved', led her to an awareness 'that on every *single* page, something happens'. This made her reanalyze her own work and she says she tends to 'get off into droopy bits about the Kalahari' so she said that the first book she wrote after this fact has dawned on her, she aimed for far more 'excitement of things happening'. She feels this is partly because 'the market has changed' and while children fifty years ago were prepared to take' books that were 'very dreamy and very lyrical [with] descriptions of …countryside,' she feels that children nowadays 'want action, they want it now and they want instant gratification like they have from the electronic media they use' (14).

She agreed that readers seem to expect more dialogue and that this could also have been influenced by the dominance of film as a medium, but felt, like Coovadia, that 'people find it easier to [read] when text is broken up as dialogue' (15). This tied in once more with her goal to write work that is manageable for 'younger children and for children [reading] in languages that aren't their own' (15). She is aware of 'the shape of the page and big blocks of text are off-putting' to these children' (15). However, she feels strongly about developing reading skills and disapproves of the tendency to continue these helping aids too long into children's reading lives, saying 'the children higher up the reading levels are expecting the same kind of thing' and she is so used to making short paragraphs to make reading easier 'but in children's reading [she thinks] this has become a bad habit that a long paragraph is considered to be too difficult to read, so it's cut down and broken up' (15). Again her teacher's concern for developing reading skills adds another layer to her style goals as it did to her goals for content.

#### 5.2.2.2 Generating

Beake describes the order of inspiration for her as having 'a strong interest in the topic and then the landscape idea is the next thing that comes up, usually, and then an enormous amount of research' (11). With the example of *Song of Be*, she had been commissioned to write curricular materials for children living in Nyae Nyae in Namibia, and this led to the research that she says made the story '[write] itself' (6).

Beake helped found the Village Schools Project in Nyae Nyae that pioneered mother-tongue education for the Ju/'hoan San community. She 'contributed to the training

[48] One of which was turned into the film *The golden compass.*

and empowerment of young Ju/'hoan teachers, especially through materials-development workshops and promotion of enrichment reading' (Beake, 2008). While involved in this project, she conducted research with anthropologist Dr Megan Biesele for three books: *Song of Be*, a counting book for young children titled *Bau and the Baobab*, and a non-fiction-fiction hybrid book co-authored with Biesele, *Waiting for Rain*, which is the story of life in a Kalahari village.

When asked what she does to generate creative ideas, Beake joked that she goes to 'look for them in the fridge' (12). She does not do left brain activities, saying 'Oh no, no, that's far too complicated' (12). Like Orford, she says, 'you *have* to make yourself write – you know, it's your job, so you can't sit there and say, "I'm not inspired today." You just have to sit there until something happens' (12).

The inspiration does always come, eventually. She mentions a few times that writing the novels that are hers from conception and not commissioned by a publisher is very difficult because she has to steal time for these from her bread-and-butter writing projects such as the readers. She gives the example of *Hap*, her archaeological novel, which she says she had to write 'mostly on Sundays, or on Saturdays after [she] had finished other things'. She describes this generation of ideas by 'sitting' as follows: 'I'd start at 9:00 on a Sunday morning and…just sit there and sometimes by 5 o'clock nothing much had happened and…you think, "There's nothing going to happen" and suddenly it *would* happen' (12).

Apparently a 'helpful thing is to go out and sit in a café and have a cup of coffee with a notebook' and describes how this change of environment was used when she had to write a series of stories for Cambridge University Press and 'had to come up with quite a lot of ideas in a short time.' She gave herself an instruction to generate ideas: "I went with a notebook and got a glass of wine and sat at the harbour at Kalk Bay and said to myself, "Right, before you leave here you've got to have written down three stories' ideas" (13). She also had another technique where, before going to sleep at night she would instruct herself, "You've got to dream a story before you wake up" (13). She maintains that this does work but she does not do this often. As with many other writers, she says she has 'been known to get up and type things in the middle of the night', although not very often (13).

Despite her ordered, well structured writing process, when we explored the topic of surprises while generating new characters, she said she truly believes 'that we write our books subconsciously; they're there and you start thinking about an idea' (4). She gives the illustration of her plan for a book which focuses on 'genetic testing and the change of identity when people think they are, let's say of Viking extraction and then they find that they're not'. She 'had that idea in mind for about a year' and has 'spoken to various people about it' and has a conviction born of previous experiences of the writing process that 'slowly but surely, that book will emerge' so that there is more there than one might consciously realise when the books is actually written and unexpected things emerge such as names 'out of nowhere' (4).

*The message* (Beake, 2009a) tells the tale of a boy sent to help his uncle in his old age, as the only child who his parent can spare. The boy goes on to join the struggle against apartheid and to study overseas, but he returns to his family home at last as a grown man. She says she 'felt very strongly' about *The message* and it began as a

short story which she later adapted into the book, a little like Coovadia and John van de Ruit exploring themes through shorter pieces of writing before penning their longer books. The story apparently 'came' to her when she was flying somewhere to do a workshop and the plane flew over the Kruger Park. Once again a landscape spoke to her as she relates how she 'saw the landscape change from Johannesburg Central to the outskirts, to farms and then too, we saw elephants from the 'plane as we were flying over and that was the start of the story and then I wrote about a returnee who comes back to his family' (2: 3).

This description of the plane journey is echoed strikingly in the book, when Msizi returns to the home he was obliged to leave as a young boy, as the following extract shows:

> And now the aeroplane is flying and below me are shining city buildings, their walls made of glass. Now we are flying over shops and houses with swimming pools…and places where cars are parked in rows and rows…. There are soccer stadiums and squares of dust filled with small, small houses. There are factories now…and small farms with big houses on them…. Now we are flying over wild land where farmers do not come. "Look down," the pilot says. "You might see elephants!" And I look, and I do see elephants, and I know I am close (Beake, 2009a: 20-21).

These varied topics reflect the wide range of different landscapes she mentioned being fascinated by and are all vehicles for achieving her goal of portraying the universalities of adolescent experiences despite cultural and spatial divides.

Her work with children in schools throughout Southern Africa informs her generation of characters and dialogue in keeping with her goal of authenticity. She has been involved in a number of projects that have taken her into schools, including a project for Parliament that took her into twenty-eight rural schools which she says gave her an insight into 'what our education is actually' like (12). All of this has increased her sense of audience over the years. With the street children who helped her generate her ideas for *The strollers*, she went to work with street children as her research for the book and she says she 'wrote it *with* them' and parts of it 'were read to them' while 'some of them read it themselves'. She relates how one of them said '"This is the first story about us since, *The little match girl*"' (12). This does not mean the book was written for street children to read, but rather that 'they informed the way it came out and the simplicity of the language, a mixture of the language' (12).

For Beake, the most difficult challenge in the generation process is the plot, which she says is her 'weakest point' although she feels she has 'learnt a lot by reading' (13). In fact, Beake devotes a lot of her writing time to extensive research for her books and has a special interest in history and archaeology. She conducts this research by going on trips to the places where she has set the story, meets with people who are experts in a particular field and reads many books on a topic. She says 'the thing that's really great is that if you contact somebody and say "I'm thinking of doing a book about merino sheep" immediately they say "Oh, come around" (16) because people 'will talk for years about their interests' (16).

She first went off on a research field trip for one of her early books, *Merino*, when she had reached the limits of her book research and a museum curator asked her why she did not simply 'go to the Karoo and ask some Merino farmers' (17). As a result, she spent a week in the Karoo and says the hospitality was 'outstanding' and when she

returned to Cape Town she 'had the story, the feel of the sheep' (17). She describes the same being true of the archaeologists she has encountered in her research, and the anthropologists and linguists in Namibia. She says for her the research trail follows first of all her 'very good contacts at libraries' and she says 'one book leads to another and a person leads to another' and this is 'great fun' for her (17). It was evident from reading the correspondence between Beake and one of the archaeologists she worked with in her *Hap* planning file that the correspondence with experts on many facets of her work is extensive and these relationships are important to her generation of ideas for fiction based on factual reality.

In part, the field research Beake does gives her this first hand experience of the sensory images of a place, but it also leads to the discovery of new ideas. When she went with anthropologists to the Kalahari to help to take sputum samples from San people for tuberculosis testing[49], she would enquire about the communities they visited. 'One of the first things that struck her was the very intense relationships within communities' (Beake, 2010) and she asked, 'What happens to people when they are rejected by their community?' (22) and the anthropologist replied that 'they sometimes even kill themselves, it is so painful to be rejected'[50] (Beake, 2010) so this was the origin of the suicide attempt of the main character in *Song of Be* (22).

This suggests that some of the inspiration from 'nowhere' might be the 'aha' moments that Csikszentmihalyi was referring to in his model of the creative process, which follow periods of preparation and incubation including reading and field research. However, as his research participants also maintained, serendipity also plays a role.

One book that came to her from an unusual source was *A cageful of butterflies*, the story of Mponyane, a deaf-mute boy in what was then rural Natal. The basic story was told to her by a woman who asked her to write it. She went to Beake's house (in Hout Bay at the time) and 'said it's a true story and she cried quite a lot while she told it to me'. Beake said she had to change the story 'because there wasn't a lot of plot in it and also to protect her' so it was not recorded 'exactly as she told it' but the woman saw every chapter as Beake completed it. The woman made no comment on each chapter or even on her copy of the completed book apart from 'That's very nice". However, when her daughter read it (and she was an adult at that stage rather than the young girl in the book) 'she went absolutely white, she said, "…a lot of this *is* the story"'. Beake said she was unable to ask the daughter what aspects of the story felt so accurate to her as Beake herself is still not sure 'which bits are true and which bits aren't'. She did know that the main character did not die in a flood but in a faction fight, however. This distortion of the factual truth in fictional accounts is a fascinating one in her historical novels, and as with Van de Ruit's description of truth telling in the following chapter, shows how the requirements of making a good story take precedence over the facts in the end, however compelling those facts might be.

[49] The anthropologists were doing 'developmental work with communities where they had previously done research' (Beake, 2010).

[50] In the transcript she had said they 'often kill themselves,' but she adjusted this later on (Beake, 2010).

The book was especially challenging in terms of generating thoughts for a main character and narrator who cannot speak or hear and has no language to communicate in. She researched this by working 'with the children at the Dominican Gridley School in Hout Bay' which is a school for deaf children. These children 'were so enthusiastic about the book' that she only 'really finished it because of them' (15-18). Thus serendipitous experience is enhanced by hands-on field research just as field research can lead to serendipitous discoveries.

Unlike Coovadia and Orford, but similarly to Van de Ruit, Beake invites commentary on her work from people she has researched the background with throughout her writing process and not only at the very end. However, she says that while 'input is always good, the input comes not in the creative process, but in the factual process' (2:14-15). In other words, the input she receives from others is for the facts that help her generate material, rather than for the creative ways in which this material is transformed and rendered into fictional prose. She gives an example from the intensive interaction recorded in the emails in her *Hap* file, with a Harvard archaeologist friend of hers. She is 'very happy to hear' from a person like this about any new discoveries in the field that impact on her book, such as that 'there's just been a new discovery that Rock Art was around earlier' (2:14-15).

Beake's research is captured as handwritten notes in notebooks but she says she 'often never look[s]' at these books again' but she has 'got it written down if [she] does need it' (17). A difference between her writing fiction and magazine articles emerges here, as she does read through the notebooks again while writing an article, as the notes for these capture more straightforward information. With fiction, on the other hand, the information 'all has to go in and then it has to come out again in another form' (17) so like Orford, she allows the information in her notes to distil in her mind and emerge later and does not copy straight from her notes into her drafts. This is an important part of the generating of ideas in the creative writing process for Beake. The lack of referral to the notebooks might indicate that generation for creative work occurs on a more subconscious level than generation for non-fiction writing, a point she agreed with on reading a draft of this chapter (Beake, 2010).

When developing her ideas for her futuristic trilogy starting with, *Remembering green*[51], she said it was 'quite interesting' as a process, because 'the vocabulary of the landscape had to change a lot because it was fun making up words…because things change so they call [soccer] 'sock ball' … while one character comes from a place called 'Popo' which is the Limpopo' (26). This is all part of 'salting it with a few little things that make it in the future, otherwise it's just a story that you've said happens in these years' (26).

One character in the book is called Tugela – a name Beake says she has been saving for years (26). She recounts coming across the name in an 1800s newspaper while conducting research for another project and saying to herself 'One of these days, I am going to use that name" (26). This then forms part of her long term memory linking into the current generation process.

[51] This is still in the publication process and not available at the time of this study.

It is clear from our discussion of trilogies and series that Beake has always had an interest in these sorts of books and is aware of and inspired in her generation of new ideas for books by emerging trends in reading such as the current popularity of trilogies among teen readers. While her reading of other adolescent authors of such popular series, such as Phillip Pullman, has influenced her as discussed previously, Beake says that while she is picking up tips while reading and 'inevitably thinking "Gosh he did that well" and really storing away things in [her] mind' she 'would never go back and look at another writer' while working because she feels a similar sentiment to Orford, that this would make her 'depressed at how good they are, particularly if it's *Northern lights'* (23) and she cannot imagine actually using one of his books as a 'how to' guide while writing. She says she avoids 'reading [fiction] books on similar topics' while she is writing. In fact, she says she reads more and more non fiction nowadays, on the whole, in preference to fiction, though she said she was unable to account for why this is (24).

While overarching ideas and a sense of landscape might lead to generation of characters, the characters themselves lead to the generation of many plot details, as for Coovadia and Orford, often because of Beake's use of first person narrative which 'means that only what that person has experienced can be said and so you have to have some kind of structure around that' (15). In *Hap*, she has two girls as characters, Lucy, a daughter of archaeologists, and the personality behind *Hap*, the skeleton that her father unearths. This allows 'two first person voices from two places' and 'two people's experience and still use the first person voice' in keeping with her goals, while Lucy's parentage gives her a believable source of knowledge of archaeology needed for the unfolding plot. She uses the same device of an expert parent giving a child particular access to and insight into an unusual world in *Rough diamond* in which one of the first person narrators is a little girl whose mother is an anthropologist, but while this device works well it can become mechanical and Beake says 'you can't do it in every book, obviously' (15). Like the other authors, Beake expresses a need to find a balance between discovering simple structures that work and an avoidance of formula, as this could allow some of the demands of the writing process to be somewhat automated, freeing the mind for the cognitive demands of creative ideas generation.

She says that the list of people who helped her with her generation of ideas and her revisions of *Hap* 'is huge' and it is 'the longest acknowledgement list' she has ever done. She needed to check all of her facts and to 'find a time period when the sea levels were right, but art had appeared' (2: 9). This was important to her because she says it is 'so easy to make a huge mistake and then the whole book loses its credibility' (2:9) although this is again driven by her pedagogical instincts and a sense of integrity in educating readers on facts. She is aware that her readers are not likely to know enough about archaeology to pick up any inaccuracies, but says 'one hopes that by the end of a book, they do know some of those things, so you don't want to put anything, plant anything that's' not accurate (2: 9). Once more, this relates to her goal of authenticity in her writing style.

#### 5.2.2.3 Organizing

Like Orford, Beake learnt to use flat plans when she was working with magazines. She says this is a critical organising tool for smaller books for readers up to Grade

Four age. After this level, she feels the flat plans showing page layout are no longer so useful, and she prefers using chapter divisions to organize her work (24). She tries to slot her story into ten chapters and while 'they don't always end up as *being* ten chapters' this helps her to work out how many words she is aiming at and provides her with a structure to complete (24). Again her knowledge of her audience comes into play, and she says 'a thousand words a chapter is quite a nice amount for young … or inexperienced readers who are struggling with language' because 'it's not too big a piece of text.' (24). For older children she may go up to 1 500 words a chapter.

This measurement is thus not only for the readers, it provides a 'basic structure' for Beake herself, who says this structure is what she will 'use to get [her]self through the book' as it provides 'a measurement' for the development of a manuscript that lets her see how the writing process is progressing on a daily basis (24). She says that 'counting the words is very important' to her as a sign of measuring 'progress' (24) as she writes each day. Apparently she counts all through the day, as a means of reviewing progress in the text and making decisions like "I must wind this chapter down" or "Let's get this information in" or "It's got too static, something's got to happen' (24). She says this is her 'best secret of actually getting yourself forward. It *pulls* you forward. You sit down and you think, "Well, today I've got to do 1 500 words" (24). This is strikingly similar to Orford and Van de Ruit's descriptions of word counts and divisions of the book such as chapters or days functioning as organising techniques which help the author evaluate texts to see what further generation or revisions are needed. She is constantly aware of style and other goals that have to be fulfilled, such as ending a chapter so that the reader will want to continue reading, during the organising process. Knowing when a chapter will end in this structure leads to sub-planning within the chapter as you have to 'plan towards that cut-off' (24). Beake says this organising mechanism helps her with her perceived her weak point of plot development (2: 5).

Beake used diagramming as an organisation process while planning of *Hap* because she says it 'was such a complicated plot' and it involves complex time lines in the present and the distant archaeological past, but she says that was the only time she has used drawing as a planning tool (24). However, this book was complex in a number of ways and Beake describes going to stay at a friend's fishing cottage in Arniston to write out snatches of imagery on the sea for a characters attempted drowning and then having to piece those together into the rest of the book. However, this was one of her 'big books' (not commissioned) and it took her four years to finish, so it was a far larger and more complex book than many of the books she writes. In her file there is evidence of plot planning, graphs and so forth similar to Orford's and one can see how many threads of creative ideas, the intricacies of human relationships, complex archaeological facts and two interlinked time periods in the present and past had to be interwoven, so it is no wonder that this project required new organising tools to visually represent and simplify what was happening for the author. This shows that new planning and organisational tools could be evolved by an author to grapple with new problems arising from the generating of a complex new kind of plot. See figures 5.1 and 5.2.

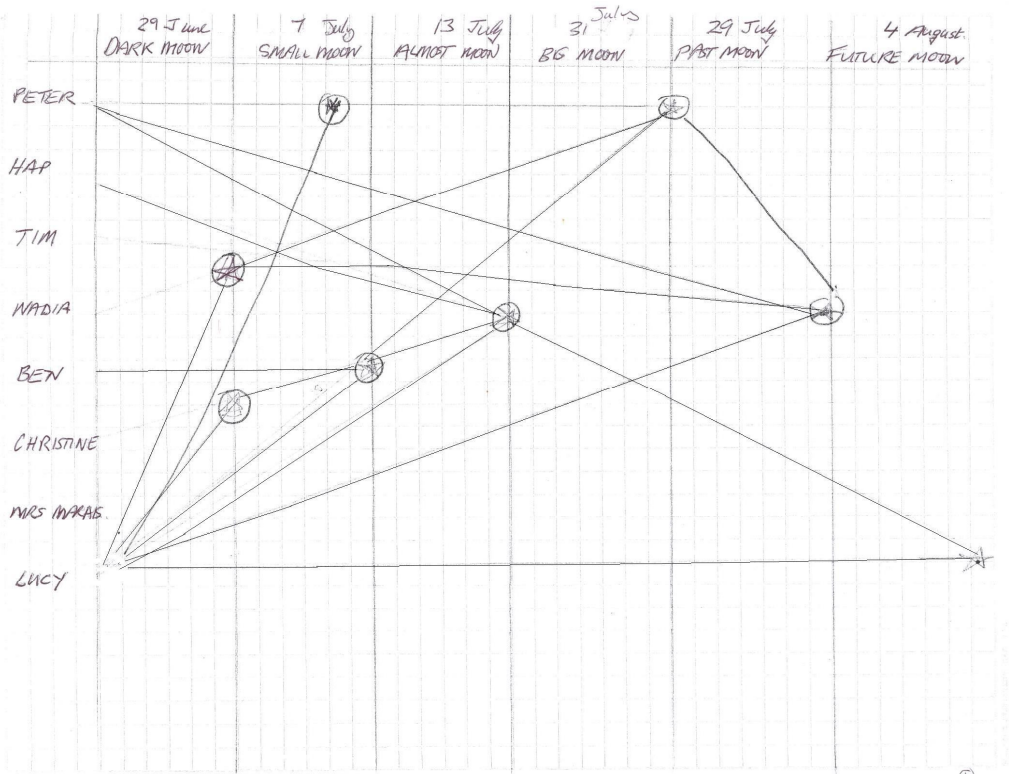



*Figure 5.1 Copy of Beake's chart tracking character interaction across the chapters of* Hap. *This shows how the organizing structure of chapters, further organized according to dates and phases of the moon in present, past and future time, allow the author to review plot and character development already generated and to decide what might need to still be generated for the clearly less developed final chapter.*

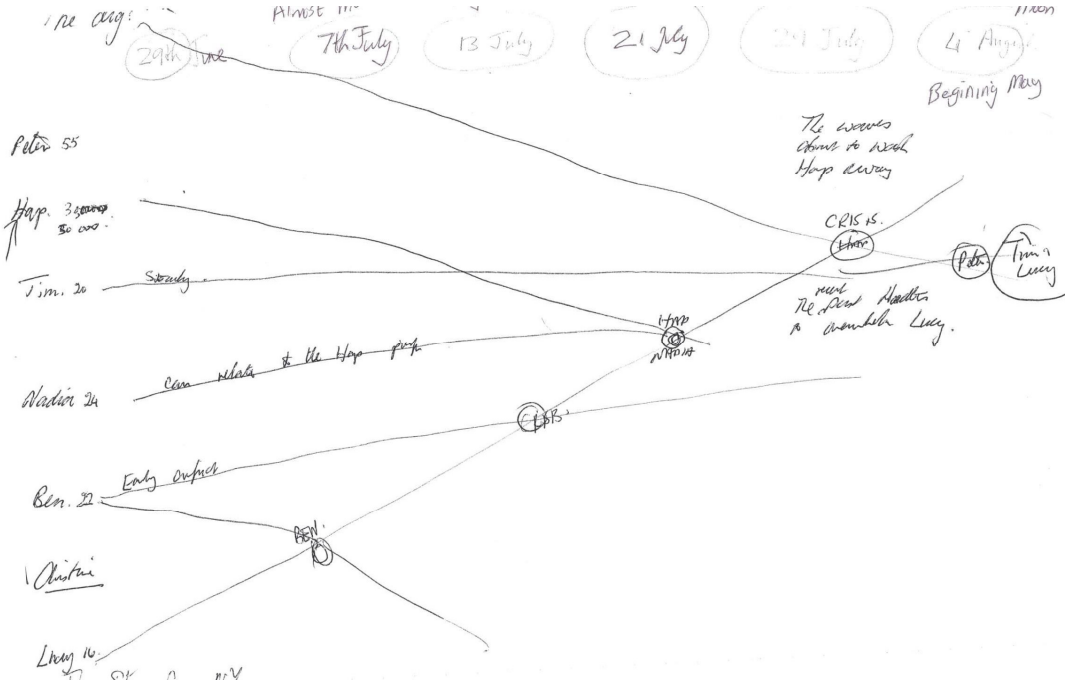



*Figure 5.2 Copy of Beake's chart tracking plot development as characters intersect over different chapters. As Beake explained, a hand injury makes her handwriting fairly illegible, as did the copying of faint pencil lines. What is apparent is the date changes (shifts in organising structure as necessitated by reviews of this) and the plotting of crisis points (The word 'CRISIS' appears above two of the nodes of connection between characters). This shows Beake's use of organising processes to review the strength of her plot development in keeping with her style goal of providing enough climactic moments to keep a reader interested, in order to decide whether or not to generate more crisis points in the story.*

Beake describes piecing together the notes she has generated so that the writing process is sometimes like putting together a jigsaw puzzle (11). Sometimes the missing piece is found in her 'copious notes' or in paragraphs that 'just arrive' and then later on, she might hunt through her paragraphs to see if she has 'got anything and sometimes, there's a whole paragraph there and it fits at that point in the book. So despite the seeming linearity of her writing chapters and marking time with word counts, there is also a sense of some ideas that have been generated spontaneously at random times or on various trips or research outings or while reading, which later find a place in the other writing.

Beake showed me her file for *Hap* as an example of how she physically organizes her notes and the large lever-arched file is divided neatly as follows:

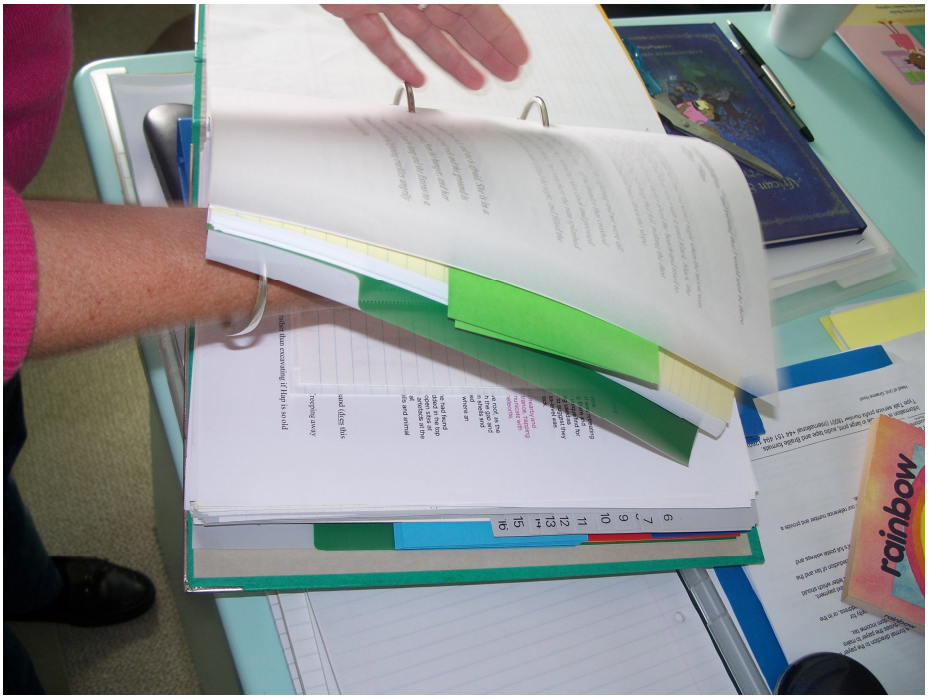
1. Final Manuscript
2. Pre Final / Boxer
3. Research
4. Comments / Proofing
5. Correspondence

And contains everything from doodles and notes scribbled on the backs of envelopes, to emails to archaeologists and others who commented on the developing book to organisational diagrams and character outlines. This filing system is in evidence all over Beake's writing study and is clearly a means of sorting and storing information that is necessitated by the number and complexity of writing projects she has on the boil at any one time, including other necessities of being self employed such as files documenting tax returns, editing commissions and so forth. One of Beake's first comments when I arrived was how I was organized and when I said I 'had to be' she affirmed this emphatically, saying 'you have to, I mean, lots of people aren't' (2).

Some of the material in her *Hap* file was never used, but she has kept it anyway, such as lists of music she was listening to which she thought one of her characters might also have listened to. Thus even subsidiary ideas and inspirations she has generated are organized into a format she can access should she need another piece for her puzzle at any time.

Beake asked that the file should not be seen as 'absolutely typical' as Hap was a particularly complicated book (2: 10). The process can be very different for the different kind of books that Beake writes. For her more than for the other authors, the outside influences of market forces and publisher's demands play a very big role in determining her goal setting, generating ideas and organizing during the writing process. Due to the pressure of commissioned book production, and her need to survive financially, she says her time to write her 'big books' has to be carved from her spare time and is often while she is tired and this affects her writing process (3). She and Van de Ruit felt however that deadlines, rather than being odious sources of pressure, help, as the word counts do, to move her writing process forward with purpose and pace.

*Figure 5.3 Lesley Beake leafs through the file used to organize, plan and track the development of* Hap.



### 5.2.3 Reviewing: evaluating and revising

Beake rarely throws any of her writing away but always reviews and reworks what she has written. Every day when she is 'working solidly' she tries to 'finish off at a useful point so that [she] can think about it over night' implying a subconscious revision of the day's writing is expected to take place while she is asleep (2:18). In the morning, she starts at the beginning and reads through the previous day's work, making corrections as she goes. This means that by the time she has completed the book she as 'read it hundreds of times' constantly evaluating and revising the emerging text. She gives the following example: 'if the man in Chapter 7 has a limp and I hadn't mentioned it before, then I need to go back and make sure it's in there at some point' (2:18). Like Orford, she says these errors can happen 'very easily' and 'are very hard to pick up' (2: 18) especially with these small details because 'you get so absorbed in the story' you cannot see them' (2:19).

She does not make too many printouts of each manuscript during the reviewing process because it is expensive (2: 11) and tends to go back and forth with editors and other readers via email. She seems to work on paper on local revisions on a particular chapter or page and on more global revisions on one or two pages of diagrammatic notes, tables, lists and so forth. The full drafts printed out in the *Hap* file were clearly at the very final stages of the book's development rather than early rough drafts. The *Hap* book seems to have mostly been revised via email with a very close friend who was also her 'mentor on the science' involved in the development of the plot (2:11).

The file Beake leant me provided an invaluable window on her reviewing process and showed both the extent of evaluations and revisions and how these occur from the very outset, from the details of the plot outline and time line through to copy editing the final manuscript. Emails from friends show comments on everything from word confusion to questions of fact, suggestions for further research, while comments on the emotional impact of a scene or character and discussions with Beake on all of these. As mentioned above, her newly developed organising tools, such as charts mapping character or plot development across chapters can provide a mechanism for more global reviewing of the emerging manuscript.

As mentioned previously, Beake has pedagogical as well as literary style goals driving her writing process, and this is demonstrated in her occasional arguments with editors over word choice revisions. She says she sometimes has altercations with editors about taking out a word 'which is a beautiful word' which the editor does not want her to use 'because it's not current' (2: 7). She feels quite passionate about this and says:

> I usually stick up for the word quite strongly, because we can't just take them all out and just have sentences that are basic English, otherwise there's going to be nothing left. I can understand Second Language and all those things, but there are some words and my great argument about that is, when the children want to read it, they will. Look at the dinosaur mania, every child in the world could spell [words like] 'Tyrannosaurus Rex'… because they *wanted* to spell them (2: 7).

Another battle she occasionally has with her editors is over making up words to add to the fantasy world she has created. For example, her editor queried the words she made

up for the futuristic *Remembering green* mentioned above (26). It appears to be her own judgement that she relies on for final decisions on word choice as far as possible.

Working with some good editors on her first books has helped Beake to hone her editing skills and this and years of experience over 70 books mean that currently she feels her manuscripts are better and 'cleaner' (meaning error-free) when she hands them in (2: 18). Her own experiences as an editor have also helped her in this regard as she has a lot of knowledge about book presentation. She also appears to feel she needs to do more of her editing herself as she believes many of the good editors she once worked with in the 80s and 90s are now heads of publishing companies and their skills have not been adequately replaced and 'your chances are that you'll be working with a fairly inexperienced editor (2: 18). She attributes this to the fact that is an 'appallingly paid' job under 'dreadful conditions' and the turnover of editing staff is thus very high (2: 18).

She feels she has always been blessed with 'particularly good editors' and maintains that they are the 'unsung heroines' of the book industry. They are an important part of the revision process once the book has been drafted (2:1).

### 5.2.4 Translation and the impact of physical environment and translation tools as situational variables

*Figures 5.4 and 5.5 Beake's study, where she does most of her writing. Figure. 5.4 shows her horse shoe style writing desk and ergonomic swivel chair for moving between handwriting tasks and the Apple computer. The window overlooks Simon's Town harbour and False Bay. In figure 5.5, one of her walls of files shows the complexity of her writing 'business' – tax files interspersed with files on her books, such as the Hap one mentioned under organising, as well as copies of her books in various languages. Her sound system and a publicity photo of Beake and her dog (used on her web page) are visible on the top shelf. The study shows a personalized space, with its strong choices of colours and styles and also indicates a well-ordered and business-like approach to the work involved in the writing process.*

Beake's office is a clean, neat and stylish space, with furniture painted mint green with white fittings and dozens of files with matching coloured labels giving a sense of order and calm. The room has a sloping open-beamed roof and a small window next to the desk overlooks the Simon's Town naval docks and the sweep of Table Bay. She is walking distance from the harbour, where she will sometimes sit at a restaurant or café sipping wine and plotting her next set of stories.

The house was built by Beake on a small plot of land and was partially designed around her extensive book collection. The downstairs is open plan with a generously proportioned dining room table and bright colours suggestive of a cheerfully social and artistic personality. Framed original paintings from children's picture book illustrations, including watercolours from her own *Home now,* after which the house has been named, and originals by famous writer and illustrator Niki Daly, adorn the walls downstairs, while her upstairs room is decorated with framed children's letters and shelves full of her books in different languages.

Beake's home has an 'overindulgence in computers' as she put it (2: 8), thanks to her work writing for web sites, but her main desktop in her study is an elegant white and pale green Apple Mac with a large flat screen and a slim keyboard. She describes falling in love with it at the shop in the same way that a man might fall in love with a sports car (2: 8).

She uses the desktop for comfort at home and the laptop for when she writes away from home. When I commented on the attractiveness of the computer she responded with enthusiasm: Yes, it's beautiful to work with and if you work on something all day, you should work with some pleasure' (2: 8).

She describes how she came to work on a computer for the first time, as this was not usual for her generation of writers then. She was writing her first book, *Rainbow*, using her father's 'old Golf Ball typewriter' when a friend visited and told her to use a computer. She declared that she would never be able to use one, but he was able to bring her one as he was in computer sales. She describes it as 'like a little piano' (around the size of a keyboard) and describes her reaction to her first attempt, when her friend said, "Just type in your name" and she typed in, '"Lesley" and it was an all green and on the screen it said, "Hello, Lesley." '. She says at that moment she 'was just hooked forever' (2: 8).

Ever since, she has, like Coovadia, 'worked directly onto a computer' and while she does hand write some things her dominant mode of writing is directly onto the computer. This was reflected in her drafting file for *Hap*, which contains almost entirely typed notes and very little handwritten material. While she says she does 'now and again work downstairs on the laptop' she prefers to work upstairs on her Apple, as it is 'so lovely to use' (2: 8).

When she goes to a coffee shop to write, however, she only takes a notebook and pen to jot down ideas, although she said when she wrote magazine articles she would usually write the entire article out in the notebook (2:8). She types her short notes out as numbered notes onto her computer and prints them out to put in her file, saying 'it's quite surprising sometimes when you find, when you go and have a look at that file, it can be extremely useful'.

There are only one or two printed drafts in her file. Otherwise she and the friends and experts she corresponded with over the manuscript seemed to work electronically and rather than print out the whole book, as Orford and Coovadia do, Beake prints out emails with revision comments from readers such as:

Chap 7 p.73 line 4, crooning softly TO her

Line 10, transition seems needed (everyone else being with Hap) my mind will not be still….

p. 76 3rd line of italiced section: land-sea at the edge of the water, is deep cold…what is deep cold – confused by grammar.

(excerpt from notes sent from friend via email in *Hap* file)

She also prints out numbered notes to herself, such as:

Note 9
The bracelets and beads. Pollen? Check with John on burial aspect.

(excerpt from Beake's notes in the *Hap* file)

While the proofreader seemed to stick on post-it notes on the final manuscript, mostly commenting on minor errors of spelling, grammar or punctuation. So practicality and pragmatic issues of cost and ease of use play an important role. When I commented that one could use software tools like Microsoft Word's 'track changes' to edit work electronically she said that she '[hates] track changes with a *passion*' (2:18), although she was unable to account for why this is.

While she does most of her writing in what she calls her office she says it is 'good to go away and for books about places, you need to, ideally…reacquaint yourself with that place... If you're writing about the Karoo, you should go to the Karoo' (2: 12). So she moves between office and her 'field work' using her laptop to write when she is 'on location'.

When it comes to transcribing skills, she says she 'used to have a very, very neat handwriting' before injuring her arm. Since then her handwriting has been 'pretty much illegible…especially if [she is] tired' and she finds it tiring to write by hand, whereas typing is much easier for her.

She has fairly exacting standards for pens and paper, saying she gets attached to particular pens but that this is not a good idea as 'you can lose them so easily'. She likes a finer point ball point pen, and knows her pen brands, saying she has only recently 'succumbed to Parker' (2:13). What matters, however, is not the brand, but that 'it's got to write easily.' She prefers her paper to be shiny, saying that she likes 'the pen to move smoothly over the page' without snagging.

Like Orford, Beake uses moleskine notebooks, saying 'we all got like that after…Bruce Chatwin told us to' (2: 13): 'The moleskines are lovely, but I must

admit, there is a kind of writing pretension' she laughed (2: 13). Also like Orford, she keeps the A5 size moleskin in her bag for writing in. She says she doesn't exclusively use the moleskines, but she prefers them to cheaper notebooks like Croxley's because she says she 'got bored with them'. She had a more elaborately decorated notebook of the kind you can buy at Exclusive Books stores, but said 'this one is just a little expensive' (2: 13), so ease of use and attractiveness have to balance out against expense at a point.

Moleskines and large screen Apple computers are not cheap either, but Beake feels strongly that 'the tools that you use should be lovely…if you can afford to buy a nice notebook rather than just a scruffy one'.

Beake says she is a fast enough typist to keep up with her thinking, but types with only two fingers and she wishes she had learnt to type. She felt that typing fast was important to the writing process because 'in terms of exactly that - keeping up - so that you don't think of a thing and then you've lost it before you finish typing it. You know, I think, I now type what I'm thinking. As it's coming out, I'm typing it. That's really an important skill' (2:14).

### 5.2.5 The significance of taking breaks

Beake's working day starts at about half past six in the morning in summer and a bit later in the winter, although she works until later in the evening in winter to make up for the later start. She tends to work for about twelve hours a day, but not all of this time is spent writing books, as she has her web pages and editing work to do as well. During the day she takes the dog for two walks down at Long Beach which she says is 'really good for [her] and it's thinking time'. When asked what signalled the need for a break, Beake said she uses the siren from the navy docks which is clearly audible from her house at ten and again at lunch time.

Like Coovadia, Beake feels that the intensity of the writing process does not necessitate breaks, but rather 'the best thing is when you're really in it. I mean, that really *is* the best time' (2: 19).

### 5.2.6 The impact of the domain and field

#### 5.2.6.1 Knowledge of the domain: skills and training

While Beake thinks her writing process has stayed 'pretty much the same' over time, 'but it's more professional and it's possible to do things in a more craftsman like way' (3) and she has learnt skills such as hands on research and improved her editing ability along the way. She credits one of her first editors with teaching her 'an *enormous* amount and several other editors that [she has] worked with [have] really taught [her] an enormous amount' (2: 17) about 'how to assess her own writing (Beake, 2010).

When asked how she had overcome the challenges of getting into the minds of teenagers she said she was 'not too sure' but put it down to developing her powers of observation, like Orford. In Beake's case, a comment from a more experienced writer when she was still a relative novice drove this home, as she recounts:

> when I won the Young Africa [Award], Richard Rive[52] was one of the judges and he came over to me and…he was a very tortured man in many ways, but he chose that moment, it was really a great moment for me, to come over and he said, "Don't think this means anything….Writers are only watchers, that's all they do" and it's the best piece of advice (17).

Beake associates with many other writers through her activities presenting writing workshops and her participation in panel discussions such as the one where I first met her and Margie Orford, at the Franschoek Literary festival (2008). She also knows other writers and writing coaches such as Dorian Haarhoff, who was 'an old friend' when they 'used to run workshops in Windhoek together and write children's books' (2: 6). So while she does not make use of workshops for her own writing, she does have much experience of running them and some of the skills she teaches in these, or has picked up from other facilitators, may have become automated as they may have been for Coovadia.

Beake says she thinks she has always wanted to be a writer and she has 'always written', inspired in part by her father's work as a salesman for *Letts Diaries* so she was 'always making books and diaries.' . She showed me a magazine she had produced at age eight or nine, called *Puppery Magazine*. She laughs as relates how she has used this childhood production at workshops to demonstrate all the 'ten flaws…usually demonstrated in a first manuscript: no obvious quality control; not finished on time; written with the aim of money (because it was sixpence); illustrated by the author (don't do that); not planned properly; not adequately researched; over ambitious; under funded; filled with drivel; and encouraged by family' (2:22).

That said, for a nine year-old's work, it is impressive: bound into book form, full of instructional titles like 'How to draw a cow' complete with labelled drawings, as well as rhymes and the charming alliteration of one title: 'Hen Without Hay' (2: 22). She began writing *Rainbow*, which she was to complete and hand over to Maskew Miller-Longman years later as a married woman, while she was still at school (2: 22). This is reminiscent of Orford's advice to aspiring young writers to write as much as they can while young.

When visiting children she encourages them to keep what they are writing as 'you're never going to be twelve again' and as an adult writer later on, this reference point could be invaluable. She also tells them it is all about practice and reading what else is on the market for your particular audience. When she runs workshops for adult s on writing adolescent fiction many of them are not in touch with what is being published and read. Adult writers for children or adolescents often 'haven't experienced modern writing for children in any shape or form' (2: 23). They are also often nervous of going into schools, but she encourages novice writers to volunteer to read to children or help with sports so that they can talk to them and see what modern children are really like.

Beake affirmed that she did learn some aspects of writing at school. Despite not seeing eye-to-eye with the school itself, she says 'we did have a very good English

[52] Author of *Buckingham palace, district six*, among other titles.

department and I think they *did* teach me a lot about [writing]'. She recalls a teacher saying, "Lesley…I have now officially decided that nobody in this world is ever going to teach you how to use an apostrophe". Beake eventually did learn how to use it through her work as an editor, because 'the most important thing is to change the apostrophes, because everyone gets them wrong' (2:21).

She is generous in her praise of Rhodes University where she did her teacher training, saying it gave her a 'tremendous education and the English department at Rhodes was fantastic in those days, it probably still is'. So while she cannot recall any training in writing, as such, she does credit her university English course with helping her on her path to becoming a writer through excellent education in English (2: 21). She explains her career development 'from teaching, to writing for children, to writing for children at school' as 'a fairly logical process' (Beake, 2008) but she learnt many of her skills as a writer very much on the job.

Beake officially acknowledges her debt to her magazine writing career in developing essential writing skills as well as her ability to work under pressure to a deadline, on her home page, saying she 'learned the basic when working on Air Malawi's *Reflections* magazine' when she was 'Features Editor and then Editor for several years' and had to write 'almost everything from the Contents to the (hopefully) amusing last page'. She describes this as 'incredibly valuable training for writing to order – and fast.' She later describes her work on internet magazines as teaching her skills that 'are beyond price' (Beake, 2008).

She has also gained some of her skills from her wide reading of children's literature. She cited two authors in particular during the interview: Phillip Pullman, whose fast-paced plotting she admires, and Patricia Wrightson an Australian author who she says she 'almost always' uses when she conducts workshops with writers, because 'Her language is very dense and *very* lyrical, but when you've read one of her books, you have a sense of what Australia was like… you have the sense of the aboriginal myth coming through (2: 6). Beake feels that this 'love of the landscape is [what]… we need most in South Africa' and that writers can learn from the writing of published authors who achieve this best.

Beake describes her spelling and grammar ability as 'pretty good' and comments that she has 'been doing this now for twenty two or three years, so it's a practice thing'. She says she likes the spelling checker software on the computer, but always tries to 'compete against it' and when she sees a word highlighted as misspelled, she '*always* [tries] to work out what's wrong with it. It's a kind of compulsion' (2:15). She feels she now makes more typing than spelling mistakes and she knows which words she cannot spell and describes learning to spell some words as an on-going process, even after more than sixty books. She could not call to mind which word it was[53], but there was a word she only mastered this year, saying 'it's a very basic word that I've always got wrong, but now I type it correctly.'

When asked if she could recall if she had always been good with language or not, she recounted how a school teacher had once complimented her by saying, "Lesley, you've got a very good vocabulary" and she had replied, "Miss Beattie, what does

[53] Later she thought it might have been 'remuneration' (Beake, 2010).

vocabulary mean?" (2:16). She did not comment on whether she thought it was important to be good at spelling and grammar in order to be a writer, but said she felt it is 'very important to do the best you can' and added that 'one of the most irritating things to editors … and publishers, is manuscripts that have been done on a computer and haven't been spellchecked.' She remarked that submitting a manuscript 'with respect' is important and that you should 'take as much care about it as you can'. Apparently, a 'brilliant manuscript that's been poorly spelt' is not a problem, but things like inconsistent spelling signal to a reader that the writer is 'just not paying much attention to what they're doing' (2:16).

As Beake is an editor as well as a writer, I queried whether her concern with spelling was her inner editor speaking and whether while she was writing she felt as strongly about spelling but she affirmed that for herself, unlike Orford, 'it has to be right'. It appears that the red underlining of a misspelled word really irritates her and she says 'I've tried, but I can't do that sort of stream of consciousness where you [write] and then go back and do [corrections] – I like the page to look right' (2:16).

Apparently the kind of error would bother her most, she said 'poor word choice' because 'that's where the power is. The other things are irritations really, and word choice is the writer's and that's where they – that's what it's about, so you've got to get that right first' (2:16) which is similar to Coovadia's feeling on errors.

#### 5.2.6.2 Knowledge of and access to the field

Because she makes her living from writing, Beake has developed a very clear idea of how the market for children's and adolescent fiction works in South Africa and abroad, and has a keen sense of who her intended audience are.

She laments the state of the publishing industry for this young market in South Africa, pointing out that we have produced very few picture books in South Africa (and many of Niki Daly's famous picture books are produced for an overseas market[54]) and readers, while critical to early literacy development, are undervalued by the public as they seem so small and insubstantial. A lot of expertise goes into writing a reader with the right language level for young beginner readers and they are often nearly as beautifully illustrated as some picture books, but as Beake points out, people baulk at paying very much for a book that is only a few pages long with only twenty five words in it (9) so they underestimate their importance and do not buy them. And yet, at the same time, Beake maintains, 'nobody does anything about changing the market. They say people don't buy South African books, but nobody provides them for people to buy' (9) so she is critical of the domain and field in this respect.

[54] I have heard Niki Daly speak on two occasions (at the English Academy's Western Cape Seasonal School in 2008 and in a presentation for my B Ed students in 2009) about his picture books and their market and he has made this statement himself. While South Africa is often his inspiration and he is very well known here, he makes his living selling books mostly in the USA, so the language level is aimed at their picture book reading market of (mostly) preschool children whose parents buy books and read to them in their home language. In South Africa this market is tiny as many children come into contact with books for the first time at school and picture books are an expensive luxury.

She is justifiably proud of her very successful picture book, *Home Now*, but like Daly, she wrote it for the overseas market, despite its African story and illustrations[55]. However, she feels that one of the Cambridge readers she wrote, *The message* (2009a) is 'is a much better book' (2: 1) but because of its format it will not be sold in bookshops in South Africa. The book is lavishly illustrated by Janette Wright and is an inspired story that reflects what happened to many black, rural political exiles, but Beake is right about its physical impact as a book: it is a thin, A5 size twenty-four page soft-cover book, staple- rather than stitch-bound with no spine. It is attractive but has very little physical substance.

When Beake says 'you'll never see it here' (2:1) she means it will never be seen outside of a school classroom and an Education Department catalogue. It will probably never be placed on a library shelf or in a book shop. While sourcing Beake's books prior to the interview, it was extremely difficult for me to find any of her many readers and the only reason my Faculty's library had a few examples is because it is an Education Faculty and our library stocks some readers as samples for our trainee teachers. Publishers are 'only interested in selling [these readers] to Education Departments' (2: 3) because this is the most financially rewarding avenue. Marketing is simple as the publisher can target very specific teachers once the Education department has given the go-ahead. The company will then get paid for large numbers of books in convenient block orders which lower printing costs and there is no expensive marketing of the book in book shops to uncertain numbers of public buyers and there are very few problems with storage costs (one of publishing companies' biggest expenses) as numbers for orders are known in advance[56].

For Beake, the politics of the market and the publishing world in South Africa and abroad affect her working process in terms of financial and time constraints as well as how structured her writing is in terms of 'language level necessities' (3). When it comes to writing her personally initiated 'big books', for example, she can take as long as she likes to write it because there are no publishers waiting for the manuscript at first but she has 'to drag that time out of other commitments' (3) if she is to make a living in the meantime.

The deadlines she has to work to for her commissioned books are very tight but Beake feels it is an advantage to 'know exactly what you've got to do by when' (3) and she tries to set fairly stringent deadlines for herself for her other books as well as she says it 'helps with the other writing and you have to set – there's got to be some kind of date' (3) to pull the writing process forward, as explained under the 'organising' section in more detail. She does not feel the highly structured nature of her writing for commissioned projects means they take less care to write, saying 'I think you need to put as much into it, if not more sometimes'(3).

[55] The book is about an AIDS orphan who befriends an orphaned elephant.

[56] I have some of this information from the Beake interview and some from my own experience publishing textbooks for Maskew-Miller-Longman and from a friend, Julia Read, who is a publishing manager at Van Schaik.

Beake holds that 'if you are a writer and you actually manage to make some kind of living out of it, then you have to work very hard'(9). She makes most of her writing income from reading schemes and also has to do her magazine and website work to make a living. The books she writes purely from personal motivation are carried on the back of this income, which is why they often have to come last in terms of time allocation. Beake says she 'couldn't live off what [she makes] from writing' (9) her books, including the readers, but that the necessity of doing other work does distract from her creative writing process and it would be a great help to writers if South Africa had arts council style grants to support writers, as they have in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The impact of reading scheme work on her 'more personal books' (10) was that she has to work to the publisher's deadlines on the reading scheme and

> when something comes up, like a soccer book with 6000 words that you have to do by end of June, it displaces that writing, but in an environment like South Africa, there is no luxury, there's no grants, there's no awards, … there's no market. So if you want to write the other kind of books, you have to take it out of your own time that you carve out and often, it's time when you're very tired and that makes a big difference to the writing process (10).

She felt grants and awards would be especially useful to get young writers started off on their careers, as she conducts a number of workshops every year for aspiring writers for children and felt

> the chances of them being published are probably pretty slim, but the chances of getting a manuscript finished are also slim. They all work as School Principals, or… [in] jobs [like teaching (Beake, 2010)] which just overwhelm all your day and night and weekends and then the time that they have left, again it comes back to it's a time when you're tired and then you're supposed to sit down and write (10).

While publishing deadlines for readers are 'usually negotiable' according to Beake (2) how well the publisher is organized makes a big difference to the writer and Beake praised one publisher in particular for being very organized and for planning the work load very well and says their series of readers was 'immaculately done. Everyone knew where they stood and there was adequate time given' (2). Other publishing projects were run less smoothly and Beake commented that many of the problems arise from 'inadequate pay for work' which leads writers who 'for example, are teaching and have been offered a certain amount for doing a textbook' to think that they are being offered a nice amount of money, only to 'find it's harder than they thought it was, but it's not very much money. So they put it off and it's late' (2), meaning they have 'no time to correct errors' (Beake, 2010).

I mentioned how royalty-based writing got better pay for the author, but meant a very long wait from the time of writing to any financial return (often several years) and Beake agreed, saying 'it's very bad and it doesn't promote a climate of good writing on *any* level' (2).

As with many of Csikszentmihalyi's research participants, who gave luck and 'being in the right place at the right time' as an 'almost universal explanation' for their success (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 46), Beake attributes her early success having a

manuscript accepted by a publisher to the lucky event of publisher Kate McCullum accepting her manuscript for *Rainbow* despite its not being on target for the competition theme of 'stories about Africa' (2). This event provided and entry point into a publishing career, and by the time *Rainbow* had been published it had already been overtaken by two other books in publication[57].

The field of publishing is changing and nowadays Beake says she has to write a proposal for a book before she begins, rather than submitting a completed manuscript. She says that previously 'you just wrote a book and submitted it' (2:1). She says this makes publishing even more difficult to get into but it has to be taken into account. She attributes this change in the field to the fact that so many people are writing nowadays and 'the market is overwhelmed' (2:1). She felt that highly publicised success stories might have given many people the idea that 'since J.K Rowling did it, they can also become as rich as the Queen if they just turn a word processor on' (2:1). Computers, she feels, 'have made a huge difference' because they have lessened the 'huge' 'commitment' (2:1) that writing a book with a typewriter entailed. Now, Beake feels that '*everybody* is writing books' (2:1). While she admitted she might be 'a bit flippant' about this she believes that making money has become 'a factor' driving so many people to write and attempt to get published, even if they do not respect the skill it takes to write a book: 'a lot of people think that it's very easy to write a Mills & Boon, because it's only a romance and others…seem to think that it's very easy to write…only for children.'

Beake is not simply guessing about this phenomenon; because she also works as an editor, she has 'hundreds of manuscripts sent to [her]' every year (2:1), many of which she describes as hopelessly unsuited to the market. She gave the example of a recent one 'about a frog who had a romance with a mushroom' (2:1). The implausible plot was not its only flaw. Apparently it was also 'written at a level of language and density of text that would be for about 11 and 12-year-olds' (2:1). Another book has a Tsetse fly as a hero, and in Beake's words, 'this is an impossibility. You cannot have a hero of story who is something so despicable as a Tsetse fly and there's nothing good to be said about them' (2:1).

Only one or two manuscripts seem interesting enough to Beake 'to send on to publishers' and she is saddened by this 'because a lot of effort and a lot of passion' goes into these books (2:1). However the sheer volume of manuscripts pouring in 'has influenced the market…because it used to be very difficult to get an agent. Now it is impossible to get an agent. Publishers wouldn't accept manuscripts. Now agents won't accept manuscripts' (2:1).

She agreed that the initial foot in the door was crucial to becoming a writer, and said 'it's another craftsman thing. You do your apprenticeship by publishing a number of books, there's certain reviews, there is maybe an award or two, then you can approach publishers and say, "I see that you write this kind of book and I'd really love to do something for you" and two or three years later, you might get a book, accepted by them' (2:1). This demonstrates that becoming a widely published author is more

[57] Which is the reason why *Rainbow* is not her first published book, even though it was the first book she wrote and the first manuscript accepted by a publisher. *The strollers* in 1987, while *A cageful of butterflies* and *Rainbow* were published two years later, in 1989.

arduous and less glamorous a process than some exceptional cases might make it appear.

Publishing success and a solid reputation of excellence as a children's writer in South Africa, and even her international recognition and awards, has not guaranteed Beake easy access to markets abroad. *Home now* took eight years to be published, while '*Hap* has taken four years'[58]. When I expressed astonishment at these time frames despite her success in South Africa, where she has published under almost every major children's publishing house, she simply shrugged and said it was partly because she was trying new styles of book but 'also because it was Britain…and…. it's very hard to get in' (2: 2). This time delay is not unlike that experienced by Coovadia and must form a challenge in terms of delaying the gratification of the author at the end of a long writing process.

Apart from her stroke of luck getting *Rainbow* published, Beake has had an illustrious career in magazine writing. While the two types of writing require very different styles and approaches, there are skills she has learned in both and, like Orford, she has learnt much of her tenacity and discipline as a writer from her non-fiction work. This would also have given her a writing portfolio to build her fledgling fiction writing credibility on and has stood her in good stead as a writing income from non fiction work even to this day, supporting her fiction writing.

In addition to her extensive knowledge of how the domain of children and adolescent fiction writing as well as magazine writing work, Beake has to be sensitive to and negotiate political undercurrents that affect her market. A book that might do well in South Africa might not do well overseas and vice versa and timing of publication and contemporary political climate are critical to a book's reception in a specific country. *Song of Be* did very well in America and Namibia but 'didn't go down well here' in South Africa as it was released in the early 1990s, which was too close to the Apartheid times for people to be comfortable with its content and some of the racial interchanges in it[59]. For Beake, it was more important that 'the San people like it' (19) and she has had positive feedback since more and more of the younger generation of Namibian San people have learnt English and are able to read her book (20).

This was the same book on which she was challenged by some Ovambo women at a UNISA conference, who accused her of 'stealing other people's stories' by writing *Song of Be,* because she is not San. She defended herself by saying 'I'm not Russian and I'm not a man, but I can write about a Russian prince in a book if I want to and nobody comes and says I'm being - I'm a lot closer to "Be" and I did my homework.' She says she managed to convince these detractors and they 'came and apologized

[58] She lamented in her notes on this chapter of my thesis that *Hap* will in fact only be in published in 2012 a further four years after the interview, as there has been some trouble with cover design, among other things (Beake, 2010).

[59] This was prior to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, so some of the harsher truths, such as the capture and enslavement of young San people by white farmers of South African origin would have been hard for some people to accept, as well as Beake's sympathetic, contextualized portrayal of *all* her characters, even the 'bad' ones such as 'kleinbaas'.

afterwards'. She feels that 'the power of writing in a personal sense, is to be able to imagine things' even things you have not personally experienced. She feels strongly that 'you can't be restricted by' the kind of thinking that would limit authors to writing only from the limitations of their own gender, race or age group. Here her passion for the universality of human experiences emerges once more. She carries on despite these criticisms, as well as the common query of how she writes children's books when she has no children of her own, saying:

> I don't take stories. I make stories from experiences and things that I've crossed in *my* life and experiences, many of them are universal. …If…you lose a brother, or you have to leave your home and go and live somewhere else - those things are the same, whether you're living in Russia, or whether you are living somewhere else.

I asked if some of the white characters, such as Min in *Song of Be* and others had a hint of autobiographical material in them by virtue of their having a foot in more than one world, sympathetic to more than one point of view but (and she finished my sentence here) 'not too involved' (20). Beake said it was "a very interesting point and maybe that's true' (20). Exploring this further, she felt that writers often are on the outside of the social activity that they observe, and came back to Rive's comment that a writer has 'to watch and if you're watching, you can't be participating' (20-21).

In fact, Beake says that not being personally involved in the lives of the people she writes about is a rule for her, especially since her 'activities in Nyae Nyae' where her writing of *Song of Be* originated. She has been going there for years but she says the very first time she stood up to make a contribution at a meeting was only last year, when they launched the website she had helped develop:

> people know me up there, but I've never been really participating in sort of active things like teaching or driving the Health Clinic truck… So I think that there is a kind of sadness about that as well… if you're watching, you're not doing, but… if you want to write, you've got to have the space to absorb.

When asked if this detachment was necessary, even though she is managing to vividly capture the perspectives of different characters in first person narratives, she said the detachment was 'a little bit' of a necessity, but that you also have to 'kind of be there' (20-21).

This ambiguous stance is reminiscent of Nadine Gordimer's contention (in Atwood, 2002: 29) that

> Powers of observation heightened beyond the normal imply extraordinary disinvolvement: or rather the double process, excessive preoccupation and identification with the lives of others, and at the same time a monstrous detachment…. The tension between standing apart and being fully involved: that is what makes a writer.

### 5.2.7 Personal relationships as situational variables

Lesley is divorced and has no children, but this does not necessarily make her life a solitary one. During the interview, she had her regular visit from a woman who helps with her website design and she says her family (her mother lives in Bot Rivier, and she has a sister and brother) are still very close-knit and 'see quite a lot of each other'

(1). Her home is often open to visits from her 'multitude of friends' who, along with her family 'sustain [her] in all that [she does]' (Beake, 2008). Her daily companion is her beloved Weimaraner dog, named Lyra, after the heroine of Philip Pullman's *Northern* Lights trilogy (Beake, 2008). She walks him every day when the harbour siren goes off and this is helpful to her writing process.

She says she is 'often asked if [she] feel[s] disempowered as a writer for young people by the fact that [she has] no children of [her] own' but the answer on her web page is a firm: 'No' as she writes, 'In some ways, this has given [her] the freedom to absorb the stories and the sense of place that are [her] books – and the time to write them' (Beake, 2008).

Beake says her family do not have a very specific influence on her writing process beyond their support for her as a writer, but that she has 'a very wide circle of friends and a lot of them have come through books.' One of these is Megan Biesele, the anthropologist whom she joined in her field work in order to research one of her novels, and through her, she has met 'many other people, including archaeologists which is where *Hap* came from'. She describes how 'each book turns up some more people that are part of the books and there's a lot of influence' because 'when you meet people, you want to make friends with them and then you go to their house and then it goes from there.' She feels that the books have influenced the friendships as much as the other way around. While I do not have permission to quote the personal correspondence in her file directly, the privileged glimpse Beake permitted into her process by allowing me to view the file she used to store the paper trail of her *Hap* writing process showed correspondence that was as filled with affection and friendship as it was with commentary on the technicalities of archaeological evidence in the emerging novel.

Beake maintains that her ex-husband, Gerry, 'really supported [her] in writing' and wanted her to write. His encouragement and support helped her complete her first novel when she no longer wished to continue with her teaching career under the Apartheid system and his work at Windhoek Airport, while 'not an ideal place for any lifestyle' did provide her with 'a lot of peace and quiet to get on with' her writing in the early days of her writing career.

When asked if it was important to have a stable home life in order to write, she agreed, saying that otherwise 'it could get a bit chaotic' (2: 24). However, she did not feel perfectly uninterrupted time was entirely possible, and says she has 'never ever managed to achieve this quiet room where I work on my own and nobody ever interrupts me' and that there are 'always interruptions of some kind. Even when you haven't got children and you aren't married'. Some of the interruptions she lists are house guests staying with her most of the time from Europe and America and her ongoing website work. She described my chosen date for the interview as remarkably quiet with only 'one phone call and one barking' (of the dog at the postman).

# Chapter Six: John van de Ruit
# From the sausage factory to a diary that dances

*Nightswimming deserves a quiet night.*
*I'm not sure all these people understand.*
*It's not like years ago,*
*The fear of getting caught,*
*Of recklessness and water.*
*They cannot see me naked.*
*These things, they go away,*
*Replaced by everyday.*
*….*
*You, I thought I knew you.*
*You I cannot judge.*
*You, I thought you knew me,*
*This one laughing quietly underneath my breath.*
*Nightswimming.*

*The photograph reflects;*
*Every streetlight a reminder.*
*Nightswimming deserves a quiet night, deserves a quiet night*[60].

## 6.1 Author background and publishing history

John van de Ruit's *Spud* series' success is unprecedented in the history of South African publishing, breaking the record for bestseller fiction sales, as well as the record for the most people at a book signing in South Africa (Vorster, 2009). At age 34 he is able to write full time, with a film of *Spud* to be released in November 2010. The books have been launched in Europe and the United States of America, and the first *Spud* was both selected as part of the Exclusive Books Publishers' Choice Campaign in 2005 and awarded the Booksellers' Choice Award in 2006. It was recently placed eleventh on the Exclusive Books list of 101 Books to Read Before You Die, and has been translated into Italian, Russian and Portuguese (About John, 2010). The second book in the *Spud* series, *Spud: The madness continues*, rose to the top of local bestseller lists as soon as it was released[61].

While it was initially intended as a book for adults, *Spud* has also been a great success with adolescent readers, and is being prescribed in high school English classes throughout the country[62]. As a publishing phenomenon, Van de Ruit has been credited with 'keeping reading alive in South Africa' (Smith, 2009: 5).

[60] Lyrics from the popular song, *Nightswimming* (R.E.M., 1993). As the 'holy grail of illegal, after lights out entertainment' (Van de Ruit, 2005: 387), night swims are an important part of all three of the *Spud* books and the song is referred to as a key moment in the third book: *Spud: Learning to fly* (Van de Ruit, 2009a: 407).

[61] *Spud – The madness continues by John van de Ruit.* 2008.

[62] Information from post graduate certificate of education students at the University of Stellenbosch, via Professor Van der Walt, who runs a book club with these students to review and discuss books that

Van de Ruit received his Masters in Drama and Performance studies (cum laude) at the University of Natal[63]. Before writing his first book, he was a successful professional actor and playwright. He won an FNB Vita award for best script and the Noupoort award for new writing for his first play, *War cry* which dealt with life in a private boys' boarding school. He also received two awards for co-writing the satirical *Green mamba* and the Durban Theatre Award for Best New Script for *Black mamba* in 2005 (John van de Ruit, 2009).

Van de Ruit's interview was conducted in the hotel where he was staying at the end of the Cape Town Book Fair in June 2009. The transcript can be found in addendum G.

### 6.2 Discussion of interview

#### 6.2.1 The author's conception of the writing process

Van de Ruit's writing process has evolved and refined over the three books he has produced thus far. The first *Spud* was an experiment resulting from the boredom of empty days on the road waiting for the evening performances of his play. The process was a 'doodle' which grew into something 'more significant' and then built up until he felt he had 'got something'. He had an instinctive feeling that the book was good, and had been driven by the desire to publish, but had not ever considered a target market or commercial success, or whether 'the humour would travel.' Apparently his fear of the publishing industry and warnings that he was 'wasting [his] time' meant he had 'very low expectations' (3). It was a 'long,' 'open-ended' process and he waited until he felt he' could not really go further with it' before he tried to approach a publisher 'but that almost scared [him], so it was safer just to keep the book and … keep going' (3). He wrote the book in various towns all over South Africa while travelling with his play, and 'in a sense, each place informed the book …and there are many flavours in that first book.' Thus this process had a 'random' feeling, but 'slowly came together' and he describes his first experience of being published as the highlight of his career thus far.

By contrast, he did not enjoy the 'incredibly tough' process of writing the second book, *Spud: The madness continues* and refers to this period as 'the madness of *The madness*' (4). He faced the unfamiliar pressure of having committed to a publishing deadline and continuing to work as a professional actor, doing 150-180 shows a year on tour. He describes a particularly low point when he was in Johannesburg for six weeks and would finish a show at 10p.m. 'come home, write until eight in the morning and then sleep all day until five, get up, go back to the theatre' (4). He followed this punishing schedule for six weeks and wrote 'about forty percent of the book' (4). He was also expected to conduct a three month book tour, in which he says he had to sign hundreds of books a day 'and [grin] at six hundred people and [make] conversation and it eventually gets exhausting' (5).

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are popularly prescribed in high schools and who asks her students to record books prescribed in the schools where they conduct their teaching practice.

[63] Spud – The madness continues by John van de Ruit, 2008.

He decided to change his process because he was not enjoying either the writing or the fame his first book had brought him and felt he needed to 'communicate effectively' with his publishers. After two books he knew he needed about a year to fourteen months to complete a book, and that this was 'professional time' (5) so he shelved his acting career and allowed his girlfriend to handle outside distractions. He also took six months off, feeling he had 'reached an end of sorts' (5), spending two months backpacking in Vietnam, without any overt intention to work there. The freedom of travel in an exotic location reawakened his creativity and he says this is when the third book 'started to bubble' and 'poured out' of him 'and it was big things. It wasn't just about details…it was big, over-arching structures' (5), including themes, content and style goals.

This initial description provides a coherent overall sense of the author's development from his first experience of writing a book through to his very difficult writing of the second book under intense pressure and finally the more matured process followed for the third book, where he was able to attain balance through an increased sense of confidence in his writing process.

He has 'no fears going into the fourth book at all' (27), and has gained confidence in his writing process, saying 'I feel like I own the medium in a way – and I can dance' (27). From his outlook, it 'makes sense that you get better as you go along' (51) and he feels his latest offering has more depth and is funnier than its predecessors.

He felt that the writing of the first book was 'more…organic' (27), echoing Imraan Coovadia's term for his writing process, while by the time he came to the third book his process was quite tightly structured and he knew from the start not exactly what he would write, but how he would go about writing the book and its main theme. Writing a book as a creative problem-solving process is thus something he has mastered.

### 6.2.2 Planning

#### 6.2.2.1 Goal setting and the rhetorical problem

Van de Ruit is frank about the desire to get published being one of the driving goals of the writing process for the first *Spud* (3). As an actor and playwright, he had achieved high levels of success but he says theatre is a very 'transient medium' (4). He did not take target market or commercial success into account; rather being published was part of leaving a 'legacy' (4). 'Ridiculous' as it might sound now, his 'major fantasy' while writing 'was seeing [his] name…in a bookstore…in print' (4), which corroborates Csikszentmihalyi's (1997: 38) assertion that problems are often chosen within particular domains in order to create something that might endure beyond the present or beyond the individual.

For his second book, his personal motivation to write had to take a back seat at times to pressure from his publishers to commit to a publishing date and reproduce the success of the first *Spud.* Despite having had a professional writing career before *Spud,* unlike Beake and Orford he had never had to write to deadline before the second *Spud* and he had to learn to manage this pressure.

He related to the *Sunday Times* (Smith, 2009: 2) how he had decided to write three more *Spud* books on the toss of a coin over drinks with his publisher, but he also mentioned to me that he had always felt that he could follow through on the first book, because he had a driving content goal of showing the development of his narrator through his high school years, demonstrating how, from when he started, through to matriculation, he 'was almost two different people' (4). By the third book, he feels he has achieved his goal of depicting a 'sharp growth' (4) in the maturation of Spud and friends and hopes that the reader will hear is a voice with 'the same tone… but with…emotional growth' (4). He 'wanted it to be a seamless process right from the beginning to the end' and says he 'always [had] this…growth perspective that would flow through' the series with a sharp increase in the third book. This seamlessness of growth and the voice aging without it being artificial or suddenly seeming like his own adult voice seems very important to Van de Ruit as he repeats the point more than once (4). It probably relates to style goals such as the centrality of the first person narration in the diary format he writes in, his extensive use of dialogue and the capturing of an authentic voice, as these are built on his experience as an actor and playwright.

He has a strong sense of what he wants to achieve in a particular book in terms of content and style, as he 'knew immediately that [he] wanted Boggo to be the driver' of the third book, *Spud: Learning to fly* (6). The purpose of having a 'driver' of each book was that it adds to the comic element which is essential to preventing the book from becoming 'too serious or aware of itself' which is something he 'really [does] not want', despite wanting to have 'the odd punch in the guts and then underneath...a deeper layer for people who want it' (6). This is one of his overarching goals for both content and style in all his books: providing his readers with a book they can enjoy and laugh through, while his underlying themes of masculine adolescent struggle and emerging manhood, generation gaps and Apartheid are kept unobtrusive enough not to detract from the fun of the book if people do not want to delve into this. For him, 'those more subtle elements…are always there, but if [readers] don't want it, they can still laugh and have a good read' (6). Accordingly, while he is 'an observer of masculine behaviour ' who sees hyper-masculinity as the source of most ego-driven evil in the world, (9), he does not wish to force his world view on anyone and gives the reader a choice in how much they elect to single out this message. He appears to have succeeded, as one reviewer commented approvingly that 'there are no heavy themes, or hidden messages or metaphors that need to be interpreted; it's a simple story and hilariously funny'[64].

As there was a lot of autobiographical material in the first *Spud*, it is natural for people to believe a content goal was to document his own life as a teenaged boy, but while he 'started writing the first book from an autobiographical perspective [he] wasn't trying to write a memoir at all' (12) and he is more interested in a good story than in the truth, as discussed below.

He had not planned for the book to be so successful and had not paid much attention to influencing any particular audience, simply hoping that it might perhaps develop a

[64] (Spud – The madness continues by John van de Ruit, 2008). This might be a clue to the needs of a South African reading audience possibly wearied by heavy issues-driven fiction aimed at a literary audience rather than a popular one.

following because he 'knew it was funny' and, like *Catcher in the rye*[65] he felt that it might develop a cult 'following from… kids at boarding schools' in South Africa (14). While he had expected that children going through similar experiences to his characters' might enjoy *Spud,* he never intended the books to be for an adolescent audience and firmly maintains that it is 'an adult book' (14). He feels it is a 'grave error' that it is being released in the United Kingdom and America in the teen market because 'there is just so much that teenagers miss. They do not get the satire of being a teenager' (14). He continues to be surprised by the books' popularity with teenagers because of the amount of humour that is laughing *at* teenagers rather than with them, and the reference points that he feels would go straight over teenagers' heads. In many cases he is deliberately 'having a wink' at the reader to say 'you know what we are talking about here' (14) so he 'really didn't think it was going to catch on like it did in schools' (14). His use of songs such as R.E.M.'s *Night swimming* (released in 1992) is also a strong identification with a particular 'era' when he and his generation were at school (15) – a reference he did not expect teenagers to relate to. His reflection on this nostalgia for the songs and experiences of youth is also something that might alienate teenagers who are currently experiencing their own school days and cannot relate to the nostalgia of a grown man for his youth:

> when we heard that song … it felt like somebody was talking to us, that our experience, our world was being told, but there is obviously a great melancholy there, where you leave school and you hear *Night Swimming* and I remember swimming in the dam and I remember being at Midmar[66] and holding a girl's hand and going for a swim in the evening and just at a party, you know and all that jumping into the water (15).

While some 'people construe often that [Van de Ruit is] harking back to Michaelhouse' and that he wishes he was still there, he says this is not one of his goals. Rather, he was trying to evoke nostalgia or 'a kind of sense of looking back… to your youth…and the simplicity and how big everything felt then' (15). He does not begrudge the positive effect his books have had on Michaelhouse, but he never intended to glorify his school days. While he is sure the school is very different now from the way it was when corporal punishment was administered, often by the older boys (15), he is conflicted about his time there. The way he portrays it reflects this ambivalence of youth – the troubled, terrifying time it is while at the same time being a vividly alive with a heightened sense of the significance of everything:

> I had some terrible times there and great times, but then I still have this funny glow that I have often tried to work through, because I am so ambivalent about the school…. [I]ronically, in my old age, those bad things have just slipped away, or seem unimportant, but I remember how much they scarred me when I was there and how much the brutality got me down and not so much the physical violence, but the emotional violence, the constant put-downs… that was always under the guise of… having a joke or a laugh or sending you up, but it just eventually wore you down (15).

The irony of his getting into Michaelhouse on a sports bursary and then turning out to be a famous author does no escape him, but he feels this was an event that was in somehow destined and this lends a sense of connectedness (26) to his life. All of this

[65] He mentions the Salinger novel in the first *Spud.*

[66] The Midmar Mile swimming race is held annually in KwaZulu-Natal and many boys' and girls' private schools compete in it.

goes to show that the style and content goals an author sets in order to affect and audience can appear at odds with how the eventual audience interpret the book, so the writing process and the product of this process are split from each other in some ways. This is why it is so useful to speak to the author rather than simply read his books in order to get to the details of the writing process and the goals that drive it.

When it comes to making decisions about questions of style, such as the use of play or film script-style dialogue in some of the Spud diary entries[67], Van de Ruit says it is mostly 'instinctive' (26) rather than a conscious decision, although he has 'set up when [Spud] sees Amanda it almost goes into film script and that is because I started it in the first book and I think it's a nice thing to carry on…I think it is his fantasy... He sees her almost as Julia Roberts' (26) At other times it is 'a deliberate comic kind of thing' and sometimes he likes to 'break it up and sometimes it's a list, like the holiday score cards … and it breaks up the eye, whereas just that day upon day of diary writing for me, so I am very conscious of that and I think that it what happens when we start feeling more commanding with the genre' (26). This ties in with what Beake and Coovadia had to say about the use of dialogue in a novel as something that readers find easy and enjoyable to process.

The choice of moving into play script occasionally is also a natural one for a writer who started out with play scripts and who says he feels 'very comfortable' with this format for a dialogue because it is what he has training in (26). It is a case of wanting to 'work to [his] strengths' as it is '[his] training, like being a plumber'. He agreed that it was also a useful device for bringing other voices into an otherwise entirely one-sided perspective which is the difficulty with a diary format for the narrative and added that it while he does not know whether most people are familiar with play scripts 'but it seems to be quite easy to read' (26) as it is dialogue in a simple format and also easier to write than traditional prose dialogue: 'it's also nice, because if you were to write that two-page dialogue, it would take a lot longer and it's harder to write that than a play script' (26). In other words, he is fulfilling his goal of keeping things simple and easy for the reader as well as for himself as the writer and this could constitute a goal for both writing style and his writing process.

Sometimes he chooses to soften rather than heighten an emotion as a style goal, fine-tuning to get the desired effect. When Gecko dies in the first *Spud*, Van de Ruit describes how he 'chose…to underplay the death….' Rather, he '[allows] it to have slow poison all the way to the end of the book, so even when [Spud] is on that final hill, you know he is thinking about his friend' (13). While the death itself is underplayed and related indirectly, the sadness of it is expressed in a cathartic funeral service scene where *Spud*, the talented young soprano, sings a solo rendition of the hymn *Dear Lord and Father of mankind*, which the author would know would be tremendously moving to anyone who has attended an Anglican school or church. The scene is worth repeating here to show the way the author has used sound and

[67] See Van de Ruit 2005: 326-327 (Spud's dialogue with Amanda, complete with theatre masks at start); 2007: 144 (also Amanda) and 304 (conversation with Runt: Spud's fist attempt at using his voice for authority over younger boy); 2009a: 17 (dialogue with Viking); 229-233 (Crazy Eight boys terrorising Runt over the telephone) – there is lots of dialogue in the last book.

particularly music to show the young *Spud's* conflicted emotions and also the way in which the boy's voice is foregrounded as discussed earlier:

> I remember the drone of the organ and the absolute silence around me apart from the cooing of the rock pigeons in the eves outside. And there I stood, singing in my girl's voice that everybody loves to a God that let my friend die without giving him any of his Amazing Grace.
>
> Dear Lord and father of Mankind
> Forgive our foolish ways
> Breathe through the hearts [Sic.][68] of our desire,
> Thy coolness and thy balm.
> Let sense be dumb let flesh retire
> Breathe through the earthquake, wind and fire
> Oh still small voice of calm.
> Oh still small voice of calm.
>
> (Van de Ruit, 2005: 382-383).

As a writing process goal, he occasionally writes to music while 'trying to find an emotional quotient' and if he finds the right song, he will play it 'sometimes over and over for three days' while he is writing to help him get into the right frame of mind (16). The 'soundtrack' that helps generate ideas and feelings is discussed further in the following section.

Other writing process goals include a deliberate avoidance of the pitfalls of churning out 'more of the same' (6) while writing sequels. Thus movement and growth are as vital to his process as they are to content and style goals and he holds: 'I've got to keep shifting it… for me, it just becomes tiring, because…I could just trot out more and more stories of Crazy Eight doing crazy things, but that is obviously now no longer really exciting for me' (6). He has to intentionally avoid the wearying effects of boredom on his writing process that following a repetitive formula would induce, similarly to Orford in writing her series. This overlapping of content, style and writing process goals is a strong feature of Van de Ruit's writing process.

His confidence in his writing process has increased greatly since overcoming the trials of the second book and having made enough money to drop his acting career and focus entirely on his writing. His current aim is to follow a similar writing process for his final *Spud* book (7). Like Beake and Orford, he now finds having a deadline a useful part of the writing process, as it helps him avoid the 'danger of having too much time' and the possibility that he might obsess and 'overdo it' when what he would like is to 'keep that rawness in there, so that it does feel like a boy's diary and not just this perfectly manicured' piece of writing (7). Perhaps what he is seeking can be described as a balance between the freedom to write in a comfortable time frame and the discipline of having to decide the work is good enough and let it move on before he overworks it.

[68] This is possibly a typing error in the book: the original is 'the *heats* of our desire' (The English Hymnal, 1983: 339).

### 6.2.2.2 Generating

The initial generation of material for his first book has a spontaneous, emotional feeling to it. The way Van de Ruit describes writing the first page of *Spud* in an interview with *Rapport*[69] was slightly more detailed than the version he told me so this will be used. He was in Zimbabwe, touring with *Green Mamba*, and was feeling homesick one evening. He felt somewhat as he had in standard six when his parents left him at Michaelhouse for the first time. He could even remember certain scents. At this point he apparently pulled the hotel's writing pad closer to him and wrote the first page of *Spud* (Vorster, 2009).

Unlike the other authors in this study, Van de Ruit's books do not require intensive research. The work is strongly linked to his personal experiences and memories and the location is a stable one with which he is intimately familiar. While he returns to Michaelhouse occasionally, he says this is really not to do research 'because I feel like if I closed my eyes – I spent five years there. I *know* where everything is, but also in a sense if it's not there, I can make it up. And a lot of stuff I've sort of embellished' (10). However, sometimes the influence of the school on fresh ideas for one of his books is more current and direct. After giving a talk at Michaelhouse, some boys ran up and asked if they could show him a 'lair that had just been busted…called the Pimps Paradise' which had been started by some boys in the wild part of the extensive school grounds and had couches and a fridge. The boys had apparently been smoking marijuana there and the previous week they had been caught by a teacher going for a jog. This gave him the idea for 'the Madhouse' and while he was driving home he decided 'this is it. This is a sign and nothing is a coincidence really' (38). This den bears a marvelous resemblance to the illicit hideaway of the group of boys in *Dead Poet's Society* that Van de Ruit studied for his Masters, so perhaps he is right about the coincidences. The discovery of Pimps Paradise seems almost too good to be true.

Van de Ruit meets his editor, Allison Lowry, at Granny Mouse's Country House, three kilometres down the road from Michaelhouse for two days, generally before he begins writing (and in the case of when he goes overseas and writes there, he goes on this trip to Michaelhouse before his departure (10). At this time they speak

> in very general terms' about the forthcoming book and 'will sometimes go to Michaelhouse and just walk around, but not to really look at anything. Just …[to] walk along the fields and…chat about the book and soak up that ambiance…. trying to reflect that unique character that you get, when you walk through a school like that and it's the birds and it just feels old and this building is almost leaning down on you (10).

His confidence in describing technical details such as the route from the dormitory to the dam where the Crazy Eight swim derives from the fact that he has not invented them: 'That was our night swim route. I know that can be done.' (10)[70].

[69] Vorster's interview was held a week after my interview with Van De Ruit in June 2009.

[70] Although when he had to prove this with a live enactment on Carte Blanche in 2005 he nearly got stuck like the fictional character, Fatty, as the window was smaller than he had remembered!

At the Cape Town Book Fair, Van de Ruit (2008) said that 'as a general rule the bad things that happened to Spud in the first book happened to me at school but the good things didn't'. Not realizing how popular his book would prove to be, he felt he may have revealed too much of himself in the first book. Having the spotlight on personal events such as having his balls polished on his first birthday at school was perhaps too much for him and he 'pulled back' for the second and third books, saying these are 'far more fictional'.

He did not have trouble turning autobiographical material into fiction because 'it happened quite organically' (12). He says he can understand why people ask him if he is Spud because 'when you read [a] book you want to know this is all true' but he 'wasn't trying to write a memoir at all and…was very aware from the start' (12). Fatty, for example, who is an important character throughout the book, 'didn't exist' and 'Gecko never existed. Mad Dog was the nickname of a guy who was there, but in a different house and three years older than [Van de Ruit] and a more sort of mythical kind of character'. Vern was based on a boy in his real dorm who also 'pulled his hair out and he was a bit of an odd ball' but he says he has 'taken Vern to such an extreme position' (10) as to render him fictional too. Rambo, another member of the crazy Eight, was loosely 'based on a guy in our dormitory'.

This 'very much mix and match' approach helps to fictionalise everything because 'if you consider that Fatty and Gecko never existed, so much revolves around those two guys in the first book… in a way it renders everything fiction (10), in a similar way to Coovadia's description of how real characters are turned into fictional ones. Van de Ruit's '[embellishment] of real life characters means that '*Spud*…may have started from my recollection of it, but I also battle to tell the truth in real life' (10).

This embellishment and adaptation of the truth as part of his personality is key to understanding how easy it is for Van de Ruit to generate fictional material loosely based on real life events, places and people in such a convincing way that even his mother has started to believe some fictional parts of the story are true, such as Spud's suspension from school in his second year there' (Van de Ruit was never suspended) (Smith 2009: 1-2). He feels that there is 'true north and then there is…magnetic north or Van de Ruit north which runs parallel' (12). He feels this is where much of the 'absurd humour' in his work lies, in that 'slightly different take on something' that is nevertheless 'very close to the original' (12). In an interview at the Cape Town Book Fair[71] he said that he 'never let the truth get in the way of a good story.'
Some family stories are verbatim, such as many of the stories of Spud's senile grandmother, 'Wombat,' who is based on his own grandmother and apparently did accuse people of stealing her yogurt and called the police to sort this out. Spud's parents are 'hugely embellished' (12) versions of his real parents and are a mechanism for underscoring the 'class differential' between Spud and the other boys at Michaelhouse, which was also true of Van de Ruit, who attended the elite school on a cricket scholarship. However, he says his parents drove 'a good car' and not the

[71] Spud – The madness continues by John van de Ruit, 2008.

jalopy that causes so much excruciating embarrassment for *Spud* front of his smart school friends (13).

Spud's father is a controversial figure with his drunken behaviour and 'conservative politics' but Van de Ruit says his own father, on whom Spud's father is based, 'has been a very good sport about it' (13) and even signed some *Spud* books at the last launch. Van de Ruit's satire of this white South African English man who is racist and 'tends to look on the dim side of everything' is candidly told. He gets 'hot under the collar' just describing his father's politics (13), but is able to see the funny side of this and the combination of honesty, emotional experience and exaggeration is what makes his humour effective. The conflict between a young boy going to a liberal mixed race school in the years after Nelson Mandela's release and his father who says he has been 'brainwashed' and is a 'communist' (13) is described in such a way that he says it 'becomes a gag' and he has 'satirized Spud's dad… [so that] even black people would love [him] because he [is] disaster prone' and 'a complete goon' (13). He is possibly right about this. Appalling as his father's comments are, he is a lovable rogue who almost always comes out on the wrong end of any escapade.

When it comes to making sure that a character does not become a flat caricature, when he writes he 'may start from stereotype or imagining somebody as a type, but then it's the carving' (13) process that sculpts the character and makes them more sophisticated. Once again he is using a crafting metaphor here, carving details into the raw materials of a character. He gives the example of Rambo, who is both 'the stereotypical big heavy' and 'very intelligent…a great mimic, …[with] a great sense of humour [who]…is highly attractive (14).

Following such a tight cast of characters who are all staying in the same dormitory of the same House[72] in the same boarding school, with limited possibilities for bringing in fresh characters or new settings, presents its own challenges when generating ideas for four books. Van de Ruit has managed to overcome this in his third book, *Spud, Learning to Fly*, by taking a group of the boys out of the school for two important events: 'The first is that they go a girls' school for a term to do a Shakespeare and the other one is they go into Mad Dog's Farm' (5).

Feedback from fans played a role in the decision to create the scene in which they visit Mad Dog for a week 'because everyone was so distraught that Mad Dog left and so I thought, well, it is almost like the highlights' package'. However, he ends this week with a party that is meant to provide closure on Mad Dog and 'not [leave] it open, so that he can come back. This was the origin of the scene in which the boys have 'a big party in the bush' (5) on their last night on Mad Dog's farm, and it becomes apparent that the boys have grown apart in the year since Mad Dog's expulsion from Michaelhouse (Van de Ruit, 2009a: 238).

The themes he describes himself being interested in, which were discussed under 'goal setting', such as masculinity and its development in private boys' schools

[72] The House system is firmly entrenched in most South African private schools, especially the boys-only ones. Houses are more than just divisions into sports or quiz teams. The House is also centered around the dormitory where the school boys sleep and there is a House prefect system in place in which older learners (usually matrics or post matrics) help maintain discipline. The House a boy is in will thus be a strong part of his identity and his experience of his school days.

originated not only from his personal memories but also from intensive academic study in his Masters in Drama. He did his thesis on the theme of Masculinity and examined

> the way that private schools… were portrayed in theatre and…in movies and books … and I had written a play called "War Cry" soon after leaving school…. and …also referring to *Dead Poets' Society* and *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and looking at history of masculinity and… my theoretical chapter was very much on the constructs of masculinity, hyper-masculinity, stereotyping, stratifying boys… (6).

Furthermore, he examined how the identities of boys are formed within these institutions and the 'double-edged sword' of 'the way that schools, portray themselves' versus the 'reality inside' and 'how it's totally contrasting to that idyllic, elitist education' that is publically projected (6).

In addition to his play and his thesis, he wrote a short story for a private writing group on the topic once… (Smith, 2009: 1). Thus the question of masculinity in private boys' schools is a topic that is emotionally engaging to him and about which he has a highly developed, extremely well-researched background. As with all the other authors, although perhaps most strikingly like Orford, Van de Ruit has been processing and developing the essential ideas that drive the generation of his book's plot lines and characters for many years before the actual books were begun. Perhaps this is why both he and Orford have successfully sustained not one but three books each with a core cast of characters and strong underlying themes.

This does not mean that he consciously referred back to his thesis while writing. He says that 'all that study on masculinity and doing the thesis and ... all that… reading…around the subject' even though he 'can't even remember any of [these books] now…but it forms that bedrock' (8). In other words, this knowledge has become part of how he sees the world, and he will sometimes catch himself being 'an observer of masculine behaviour.' He enacted the body language of a macho, muscle-bound man and said he cannot see someone like that without thinking 'Ooh, hyper-masculinity!" He does not write 'with a theoretical underpinning' because this would be 'death' for a commercial book (8) but it emerges in the way he depicts interactions between his mostly male characters (and the occasional female ones). An example is the character Boggo calling Spud 'a lesbian' to make himself feel better about the fact that Spud, as 'what he sees as this ineffectual pre-pubescent boy' is 'coming right with a few pretty girls' (9) which is the sex obsessed Boggo's main aim in life. Van de Ruit says Boggo needs to 'justify it to his own ego' but 'if somebody calls you a lesbian and you are a boy at school, it's something that can actually…work on your brain. And it can make you deeply unhappy' (9).

The process of generating can unsettle the writer's equilibrium, as during this generating there is perhaps not enough mental distance between the fictional and the real in the writer's mind. Charles Dickens apparently 'cried the whole time his pen-wielding hand was pitilessly doing [Little Nell] in' (Atwood, 2002: 38). The same technique he uses to arouse the emotion necessary to write a moving scene naturally affects him in his own life as well as in his writing. He describes this as happening particularly when he wrote the first book and Spud's friend *Gecko* dies:

> I actually went into a depression after I finished the first book, because of that Gecko death and …it was so weird because it wasn't real, but I was weeping when I

> was writing. …And I think, just the whole process of it, I do not know what happened to me, but… I could not leave my flat after I had finished that first book. And eventually, after about three, four weeks, I, literally, I did not go anywhere and then I went to the doctor and I said, "I don't know what's happened to me. I've got no energy. I'm feeling like listless and exhausted and I think I've got bilharzia". They took all sorts of blood tests and urine samples and she came back and said, "You are absolutely fine. Have you considered the idea that you might be depressed? … "Has somebody died?" (16-17).

This was particularly part of writing his first book, saying 'it is a hugely powerful experience writing a book and particularly a book like that and I put my all into it' (17). He feels it is not surprising if others are moved by this scene because he was so moved by writing it (17). This could be related to Orford's desire to tell an emotional truth hidden beneath the potentially superficial truth of facts as a driving goal in writing fiction.

He used music to generate the emotion he needed for this scene and he also used this generation technique when writing about how the boys hear the song *Night Swimming* by R.E.M. (1993) for the first time. He researched the details of the song's release and 'had to wait until the end of the year' when the song was released in order to write in this scene' (16). He

> certainly feels that in [his] brain is a soundtrack that goes along with [Michaelhouse] and …if I close my eyes now and I just almost hear it, it can be the chapel bells, it can be the organ…playing a hymn or the choir singing inside the chapel. It can be the cooing of the rock pigeons just when you hear nothing else… and other times it's music coming through windows, and it's then there's also the soundtracks of your R.E.M. or U2 (16).

For Van de Ruit this music brings back memories not only of his own school days but is also reminiscent of

> a very important epoch, in, not in South African history, but also, the Berlin Wall coming down, in a sense, the end of communism and the sort of opening up of the world. The technology starting to come through. Computers and … I think, that '90 to '95 was just a massive time to be South African and to be anywhere (16).

The emotional impact of singing itself is carried across in the book too, with the young Spud being a successful soloist in the school's chapel choir and landing the lead role of Oliver in the musical *Oliver Twist.* This was inspired by his own experience, as Van de Ruit describes how he 'had a brilliant voice before it broke and…was asked to go to the Drakensberg Boys' Choir' (17). So it was 'all true' in the first book about Spud's great soprano voice and so all that, *Oliver* and singing the solo' which had it's own triumphs and humiliations as he says the 'short lived spate of status in the school' resulting from his 'star' status in the play dissipated quickly and he went back to being a boy who was teased because

> [He] was nearly in standard nine when it started breaking, which was excruciatingly late if you're in an all boy's boarding school….Having a beautiful, soprano voice at 15, is not helpful (18).

These memories of the impact of sound tie in with the memory of scents that he mentioned previously in the recollection of his first homesick days at Michaelhouse when he started writing the first Spud. Sensory images thus play a crucial role in

recalling emotions stored in the long term memory, as well as in the generation of new emotions while writing.

Some characters are used not only for comic effect but also to introduce other issues that interest Van de Ruit. Once such character is The Guv - an English teacher who takes the young Spud under his wing and introduces him to an extracurricular reading list that is both impressive and eclectic. One of the first books he lends Spud is Sue Townsend's well-known *The secret* d*iary of Adrian Mole aged 13 ½*. I commented on some of the similarities between his books and the Adrian Mole diaries, particularly in the style of humour and the relationship between Adrian and his parents. When asked if he had been influenced by this book, he said he had read the series as a teenager and 'really enjoyed it' (21) and 'thought they were very funny' but he said he thought a lot of people might draw a similarity and this was why he 'referenced it' in the first *Spud* (21). When Spud lists all his favourite and not favourite things he writes 'Worst book ever. Adrian Mole. Any diary written by a woman. He would not last ten minutes in our dormitory, By the way, I still loved it' (21). He says he did this because 'the academic in [him] knew, anticipated that if anybody ever reads this there will be comparisons' but he has actually been quite pleasantly surprised 'because Adrian Mole is…quite a long way away[73], but also, it's a very different book when you get down to it. I mean, the diary is the same, but obviously Adrian is very self-obsessed. So it's all about his life. Whereas Spud is almost a narrator figure, particularly in the first book. He just watches everything that is going on and writes this story' (21).

He admits, however, that some of his humour is 'definitely inspired by Sue Townsend – the way I'll shift from writing normal past tense to the present tense, bullet form: 11:01 Dad foes here; 11:02 Dad du…du…du…. That sort of structural comedic and you've got to be careful where you use it. I am very aware that I do not want to overdo it, but … I usually identify my big comic set pieces and then do them in present timing and it is also a nice break from the daily routine style' (21). He 'refused' to read any of the Adrian Mole diaries while writing *Spud* because he knew that he would 'start aping, because [he is] a terrible mimic'. In fact, he tries not to read anything while he is writing in case he mimics the style or characters, and like Beake he says if he does read he will 'tend to read non-fiction' and it is a wonderful to be able to read fiction again between books (21). He confesses to being tempted to read *Adrian Mole* while writing his first book, but he did not partially because he was always worried that readers might say, "Oh, it's kind of a South African Adrian Mole" and [he] knew instinctively that it was very different to Adrian Mole' (21).

Other books The Guv gives to Spud include *Catcher in the* Rye and *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. The reference to Paradise Lost in a coming-of-age story where the hero's real name is *John Milton* was too big a coincidence to gloss over, so I asked how calculated the choice of this name had been. The nickname *Spud* apparently 'came quite quickly, right at the beginning' and then he had 'liked the idea of him being named after a great, but now fairly obscure classic writer' (22). He

[73] *The secret diary of Adrian Mole* was released in 1982 and made Sue Townsend the bestselling author in Britain in the 1980s (Biography of Sue Townsend, 1995). It was still very popular in schools as teenage reading when I was at school and in some of the schools where I have taught it is still in libraries as a recommended title for teenaged boys in particular.

> loved the whole *Paradise Lost* thing and then it was obviously a direct link to The Guv, because [he] thought, why would The Guv in that first English class pull him out, and it's purely on his name….and then he sees that this boy's got a facility for English and is actually quite a clever lad, but also quite soulful and a little bit lost and… there begins the most key relationship in all the books (22).

Consequently, some names like John Milton and his nickname, Spud, are 'quite a deliberate choice' and others take some thought, but equally some names 'just arrive and then you just go "that's it!" As an example, he says 'The Guv popped in'. The sense that these names are good for the story is a gut feeling: 'It just felt so right' (22).

The Guv 'was inspired by a teacher [he] had for [his] first year' but with whom he never had a special relationship. His alcoholism is important to Van de Ruit as it 'gave him a weakness' as Spud's hero and mentor and there is the 'tragedy of Spud seeing him drinking and getting drunk and…and the collapse of his marriage' (18). There is also a growing sense that Spud is becoming 'more important to him that he to the boy, or the balance almost being righted, whereas at the start, he needs the Guv and he is so desperately homesick and he is miserable. The Guv's almost the only thing that keeps him going' (23).

Van de Ruit agreed that The Guv's need for Spud puts a lot of pressure on the young boy and added that 'Poor old Spuddie…has a lot on his shoulders' (23) so 'it must have been incredibly hard for the poor lad.' It is interesting to hear the author speak of a character of his own creation as if he were a real child like this, especially as he is a version of the author's own younger self.

He agreed that the adult characters are quite useful for bringing adult issues into a young boy's world (23). Sometimes he 'gets frustrated that [he has] got to tell [his\ story through the voice of a … 13 to 17 year old boy' who can only comprehend a limited amount of what is happening around him. This was also the reason why he made Spud 'incredibly bright and a scholarship kid' so that he 'can cheat' (24). This is apparently a critical difference between his experience of adolescence and the Spud's. If he were retelling his own life, he feels he was 'nowhere near that advanced' and he was 'very immature' for his age. Rather than reading he would have been 'playing ping-pong against the wall with somebody' (24). Spud is 'the way [he] would have loved to have been' and 'in many ways, he is almost [Van de Ruit] reliving [his] life and being able to sort of revisit how [he wishes] that life had been for [him]'. He wishes that he 'had had a mentor figure' who had introduced him to literature at thirteen (24). Some of Spud's relationship with The Guv is a reaction to a longing to be in one of the inspirational boys' school films or plays like *Dead Poets' Society* and 'longing for that inspirational teacher that never came…until varsity' (24). At this point he admits that 'a lot of Spud is drawn from [his] University years – a lot of the relationships, a lot of the complexities of girls' (24).

The irony of the creation of what he feels is a much improved version of himself is that 'in a 100 years' time, once I'm dead, if Spud is still read, people are going to believe that those are [his] memoirs' and he has, in a sense, 'almost rewritten [his life].' Despite having repeatedly reminded people that it is a fictional book and a fictional boy, Spud's experience 'eventually will go down as [his] experience' (24). He says he has no problem with this; in fact, 'as a creator, what better thing to do than to create a character that outlives you…I mean, that's what I do for a living. So, for

me, the fact that Spud is more famous than I am gives me nothing but a thrill' (24). He agreed that he had in a way achieved both a transcendence of the traumatic experiences of his own past by writing about them in a humorous way, while on the other hand also creating a better world that the one he had lived in'. This ties in with what the writing respondents in Csikszentmihalyi's study said about creating better worlds through writing (1997: 38) as Van de Ruit has generated a fictional past that he feels is a vast improvement on his real memories.

One of the ways Van de Ruit has recreated a world (25) in his *Spud* books is that he has made everything appear to happen 'at quite madcap rates' so that 'when you read it, it just feels like you are getting onto a conveyor belt and you have to literally jump off to put it down' because the 'world spins a little bit faster than it should' (25) like the condensed time in a film. He says this is a big part of improving the impression of Spud's life compared to his own, as he says 'the truth is when I remember boarding school, I remember the boredom. I remember the banality and… my greatest memory is just sitting around …. [and] the time I wasted at school' (25). At a school such as Michaelhouse there are 'so many options' and 'so many facilities and societies and things you can do and different sport and the library' and that one of his 'regrets' is that he did not get involved in all of this. Spud has allowed him to vicariously 'sink his teeth in' to these opportunities. 'So now everybody thinks that was my life, but unfortunately mine was far more banal' (25).

#### 6.2.2.3 Organizing

Van de Ruit feels that with his last book he has achieved a kind of 'template' for organizing his writing because this was 'the most thorough planning process' he has had. He began by writing notes for himself, such as '"Boggo is the driver for this book"' 'He is the comic spark every time' (29). This character-as-driver is true of each book, he says and is an important part of the 'comic element, so that it did not get too serious or aware of itself' (29) (which is one of the goals for his writing style discussed earlier). Each book also has its unifying themes that set it apart from the others, along with the main driving character. While in the second book, the boys are rebelling and fighting against the system that the school embodies, in the third, 'they start getting…boy politics' as the boys vie amongst each other to get selected as prefects (40).

While in Vietnam in 2008 and planning *Learning to fly*, he 'wrote out every single character and gave them a comic quotient out of 10' to give himself an idea of which character he wanted to be driving the comedy in the new book (30). For example, Vern's 'comic quotient' is very high in *Spud: The madness continues* as he is often his 'punch line.' He organizes his comic moments mostly 'in threes' with, as a typical example, 'Fatty said this, Rambo said that… and Vern pulled out some hair' (32-33). Vern usually tips the scales from slightly mad to completely ridiculous.

Because his characters are so important in driving his story, he never has a character arrive while he has already started writing a book and describes his characters as his 'pillars' as 'characters are everything' (40). He attributes the centrality of characters in his writing process to his drama training as he says in the theatre 'you start from characters' (40). His confidence in moving forward with his writing career, he

believes stems from his knowledge that he has 'the ability to create very visceral and realistic characters' in part because he is 'a good mimic' (40).

When a character in *The madness continues* did not fulfil the role he had planned for him, he was dropped from the book and even took on the nickname 'Alexander Shortstay' as he only stays in the dormitory for three days. Van de Ruit pulled Alexander out of the series so abruptly because he 'didn't like him' and 'didn't feel he was right' (40). Every character has to have 'his own niche and have his own energy' and not simply slot in to fill in a missing character but also add value' to the core group of characters (40).

One of the plot devices he has structured into the school year is the 'dying season' in November. He says he tries to keep this thread running through each of the books 'in such a way that it doesn't seem sort of crazy' (41). In the first book, Spud's friend Gecko dies, in the second, the popular culture icon Freddie Mercury dies and in the third book it is the infamous green Milton station wagon, and Spud's nostalgia is palpable as he muses: 'I never got to have one last ride in the roaring green beast before she was taken away. But then again, it's the dying days of the dying season and the monster must be fed' (Van de Ruit, 2009a: 404). Van de Ruit describes this 'dying season' as 'just a thematic thing…a quirk if you like' (41) but it is something that gives the reader, through Spud's perspective, a superstitious sense of anticipation in each successive book.

Notwithstanding these devices, the plot can be less highly structured at times. Van de Ruit's stories 'go off on a lot of tangents' but in general, he knows 'the big plots' (38). There is room for big surprises, as when he was writing *The madness continues* and had the spontaneous discovery of The Madhouse described under the generation of ideas above. Van de Ruit said he 'was already well into the process of writing *The madness continues* when the discovery of the hideout 'gave [him] that central thematic pull…which was the Madhouse and then the breakup of the Madhouse and the shattering of the Crazy Eight when Mad Dog and Rambo are expelled' (39). He says this was a case of a surprise event that 'really shifted' the writing process completely.

Sometimes he does not 'even have a note' in his original drafts but will 'pick up on something and run with it' but he always knows he 'can run this thing as far as it goes and if it doesn't work, [he] can just chop it out' (39). This is thanks to the overall organizing structure of the diary. It is relatively easy for him to make cuts because 'you can cut and paste…something from the first term and take it straight out word for word and just paste it in the fourth term, and…suddenly' he can see that it 'reads much better there.' It is then just a matter of doing 'a little blending in paragraph – a few set-up things' (39). This necessitates moving backwards and forwards at times, as if he inserts a chunk of plot into a different part of the diary, in order to do his 'blending in' of these paragraphs, he has to put in the build up to the moment he has inserted. For example, he may need to put in a few days' worth of references to anticipating the event and this makes it 'such a scrambled process' at times' (39) and yet not too taxing to hold together.

This use of a relatively simple overarching structure with the school year and terms and then the diary's days and months is reminiscent of the 'simple envelope' that Imraan Coovadia spoke of. Van de Ruit says that this helps him with making revisions and with working out the pace of his book, as Orford and Beake mentioned having chapters to work out pacing and the build up of climactic moments to keep the reader's interest throughout a book. Likewise, each of Van De Ruit's books consists of one school year in the life of Spud, worked out as follows:

> the first term is the slowest term, because it always sets up everything. Then the second term is quite often where all the major action starts happening. The third term is always that mysterious time, it's the dying season …where… things can go really pear-shaped and then [in] the fourth term… you'll see that you battle to put the book down, because…everything starts unravelling very fast (39).

This reflects the real school year's pacing, where the first term is usually the longest, and the terms get progressively shorter until the final term which is cut very short by exams. He said this was how he felt at school where 'the fourth term…is always a short term…it seemed to go by in a blur' (39). He has these signposts in his diary, 'So once you got to the Michaelmas[74] holidays. You've basically broken the back of the year and that's the same thing with a book' (39).

In his *Spud* books, there are a few patterns set up to be deliberately broken with some or other surprise: the 'dying season'; the final night swim of the year, with its own surprises, such as Mad Dog breaking back *into* the school to join them after his expulsion, and the last moment of meeting his father at the end of the year; the 'scorecards' as the boys report back to their dormitories after each holiday; the suspense over sports team selections and the triumphs and disasters of each year's love interest and school theatre production.

This planning process of dividing the year solidified as he was writing the third book. After writing his initial notes, he separated them roughly 'into Term 1, Term 2, Term 3, Term 4' although he says he does not 'stick to that necessarily. But [he] just [gives] himself an idea' (30). After this first sifting process, he will work through each term and 'try and think it through' (30). For *Learning to fly* he imposed another structure, loosely following 'a Shakespearian five act structure', which he says helped it all to 'flow' so that the 'five acts with the varying intersecting plots [come] together to… a week of big explosions at the end' (30). He achieves this by 'setting up…my major thrust in Act 1, the big climax at the end of Act 2' and then he follows Shakespeare's lead once more as he 'takes it off to another realm' in Act 4 by taking some of the main characters to a girls' school for a whole term's drama production (of Shakespeare's *Midsummer night's dream*). While he says he 'thought a lot about' this structure, he did not become 'too obsessed with that idea' either (30).

He uses sketches to visually map out the structure, so he decided that the 'first act ends for example at the end of the first term' and then 'looked really at that first term, chose what elements I wanted from the big pool of ideas [in his notes], threw things in

[74] Spring term in the Anglican schools' calendars.

there' and then he starts at the beginning of the first week and writes down all of the weekdays on a piece of paper and leaves a space under each one to write in the details: 'So I'll go, "Monday - set up Milton's car trip back to school, arrival, set up Garlic, weekend score card and set up Pike"' (31).

The start of each book as 'very difficult' to plan as he has 'got so much to do' but he does not mind the slow start as 'it sort of ambles along in [*Learning to Fly]* because there is a lot I have to get set up at the beginning' such as the introduction of new characters and the news that the notorious Pike is a prefect (30). Like Shakespeare, he says he is very unhurried setting up his first scenes:

> in a general week I will have say, Monday: "lunch with Guv." Then I'll have Friday: "Conflict with Pike after lights out." Saturday I'll have a cricket match and then I'll think, well okay, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Now if the Friday conflict is going to be a big conflict, then I don't want to go long story, long story, long story. I'm very aware of the rhythm. So I'll go "ratta-tat-tat" … a short little something for Tuesday, maybe nothing for Wednesday and then set up the Pike thing maybe in a subtle way … so …the…reader knows it's coming. Then we get to Friday, I have my big explosion. Saturday, then it obviously depends on how Friday works , because that leads onto Saturday, but obviously when I'm writing, things jump in all the time. But I'm very aware of the rhythm, so I don't like having a big story and then when I want the rhythm to go, if I feel like, like you will see the first week takes about 50 pages just about in the book, because there's so much I've got to set up ….Then…I almost get anxious. I go, "Come on, come on, we've got to go now, we've got to go", so then I start going a much shorter, "bang, bang, bang" (31).

This shows how the week itself is almost like a scene within each Act – he has a way of building up the pace within each week as well as within each term, and this helps him decide what material goes into the writing of each day's action. All of this is aimed at keeping the reader engrossed in the book, and this is how he aims to get a reader suddenly saying, "Oh my word, I'm on Page 63 and I, you know, I've been reading for two hours and I'm already 20% through the book"' (31) as he maintains 'the reader loves that thought, that they know that they're getting into it' (31).

He considers the reader as more of a theatre audience when he is developing this tight structure (31). Apparently while sitting at his desk he will 'get into that Spud feeling. I almost become like a Method writer[75] and my legs go [he jiggled them up and down as if very excited]…and I'm almost imagining I'm on stage, performing this for an audience' (31). He says this influences his plot structure because in 'theatre you can't drop the ball and I think writers are so used to dropping the ball. They feel they can just zone out for pages and pages and waffle about some minor point like a flower, or a sunrise, or Karoo landscape and they have no idea' (31). This was very close to what Orford and Beake saying they had to avoid this pitfall of being seduced by lyrical descriptions of landscape that potentially dilute the plot. In conclusion, he says he is 'still an actor at heart and instinctively, I feel it all…I feel that I don't sit there aloof writing. I am very much involved and it's almost quite a physical manifestation of the writing that I experience' (31). This projection of a scene he is writing into a theatre performance in his mind seems to be an intense experience and quite possibly

[75] He is referring to the idea of a Method actor, who uses either their own memories of personal experiences or their imagination in order to enter the mind of the character and feel the emotions that character might have. This apparently allows actors to use real emotions rather than woodenly acted ones when portraying a character (Lefer, 2000).

is why his books could be described as 'crowd-pleasers' as if they were plays. It also ties in to what he said about humour being a tightrope act where you are either funny or you are not so the comedic timing he spoke of is not simply in his 'rule of three' comic moments but built into the emotional pace and structuring of the entire book.

### 6.2.3 Reviewing: evaluating and revising

Van de Ruit has a cheerfully bold approach to making cuts and rearranging his material through various phases of revision. As his organizational structure is so clear cut, as described above, it is a helpful tracking device when he is revising, cutting or moving text (30).

As with truth-telling, the story comes first and while Van de Ruit is happy to have a final fling with a character who is particularly popular with his fans, if he wants to cut that character out because they are getting in the way of his vision for the book, he is quite ruthless about making the cut, as he did with Mad Dog: 'I am very brutal with that, like if he's not right, I get rid of them. You know, just like I got rid of Mad Dog…. I could not carry on, because it *always* went to the same conclusion' (41) which stops being amusing after a while. Another character who had to go was Gecko, for reasons of Spud's personal development, as 'through death we have an awakening' (41).

When it comes to increasing the amount of direct speech in the most recent book, he is 'dancing in the medium and taking more risks' (27) partly in the knowledge that he feels he 'can't really go far wrong. As long as it reads and if it doesn't then I just chop it out' (27). His first draft of *Learning to fly* was 155,000 words, while the final book was 110,000, so he has 'chopped out nearly a third of the book' (27). However, to him there is 'nothing precious' in his first draft. He puts as much as he can into it, almost 'over-[writing]' it and then starts 'filing' or 'carving' away. This is the part that he 'loves' – 'that editing process' and that 'chopping it away and just chopping out huge sort of extracts and chunks gives me great pleasure' (27) and apparently takes him six months and about five or six drafts. He likes this '[sitting] down' because 'you've got something to work with, as opposed to having to get it all out' (27).

He describes a 'weird' 'instinctive thing' where he can 'tell immediately' if a line is a '90% line, or it's a 30% line and if it's not a 90% line, then sometimes it just needs two more words.' He calls this rating of a sentence's effectiveness a 'funny science' but the 'problem jumps' out at him and 'flashes' him in an obvious ways so that if it doesn't 'read well' he will either take it out or decide it 'just needs a little bit of massaging.' In the end there is no single line in the whole book that is 'just a line' to him. This kind of obsessive checking happens later in the process, but he feels people often do not realise that this is also 'part of the joy… it's the romance of writing' as it comes down to working on a 'construction site …looking at every brick' and checking for fault lines in each one (52). For him, 'it's craft, it's craft, it's craft' (52).

When asked whether this was something he had learnt to enjoy over time or if he had found it more difficult at first he responded

> No, not really…I have always been totally unprecious about my own writing. They are words. It is like Lego blocks and you are building a huge thing, and I think the great problem with many writers, is they are so precious about their work and they won't give

> over. You know, when my editor says, "I do not like this." I go, "Fine, it's gone, boom!" and it means nothing (28).

This enjoyment means he also does not mind the involvement or commentary of others in the editing process. Like Beake he has at least two people who are part of the writing process from the beginning. His girlfriend reads through his work at the end of each day and makes a few comments or asks a few questions about the text before they unwind and relax together.

Despite having retreated to the Kalahari to prevent himself getting insecure and calling his publisher, Alison Lowry, incessantly to hear what she thought about his first draft, (10), he describes using Lowry as his 'sounding board' (28) throughout the process, and he asks for her involvement whenever he feels he needs it. The need to run away derives from his sense of insecurity and while he despises this in himself he claims, 'we all have it' (10). Generally Lowry will see his work at the end of the first completed draft, but sometimes he gives her very rough work such as the first 25 000 word draft for feedback. She will not say much for the first drafts but encourages him to keep going (28). She is most important when she gives him the 'big feedback' (28) once he has completed the first complete draft. At this point, Van de Ruit has 'a huge manuscript that's as rough as a rhino's backside' and then she is of great help as at this stage in the writing process 'you also lose…objectivity' (28).

He does not know how other writers cope without 'a figure on the outside:' a person who acts as a sounding board at this critical stage when she gives him 'perspective' (22) on the work. Lowry is able to do this subtly and he can 'just see by her notes' (22) where something really needs revising. For example, while writing *Spud: Learning to Fly* he had a 'whole Romeo section that turned out to be erroneous, but when [he] wrote it was quite a major plot line' (28). Apparently he estimated that around 'sixty to seventy percent [of Lowry's notes] were about this plot line' (28). It would just be a line of commentary or a query every now and then, such as '"This is still not working for me here. I suggest you've got to try and fix this," or "Why is Spud doing this? Why would Pike be getting involved now?"' (28). This drove him to ask Lowry if they really needed this particular plot line and she apparently replied, "I don't think I would really miss it if it wasn't there. For me, it's problematic," and his response was, 'Fine, it's gone' (28). He then chopped out 15 000 to 20 000 words and had to 'band-aid the holes' (28) to make it all work again, but he is very cheerful about this and does not take it as a criticism. Lowry appears to have mastered the art of allowing the author to come to a conclusion and make a decision himself about what to cut or alter thanks to her extensive input but without harsh criticism or judgement.

Lowry's revisions may also spur Van de Ruit to generate content he had not intended. He describes how while he was writing *Spud: Learning to fly* she 'constantly push[ed]' him with the query: "Where's "Fatty's farting" this time?' and his response was "Come on, he's in Standard Nine now. Surely he's moving on." However, she persevered, saying, 'No we've got to have at least three' and this negotiation led to Van de Ruit's capitulation: "Okay, three is all you're getting" (34).

Van de Ruit says of this process of (sometimes collaborative) evaluation and revision that

> it is really like making sausages ….So at the end it looks like a perfect sausage, but… I have had my blooming sleeves up and …, pulling things out of here, cut and paste…it's like a construction site for a long time (29).

Here he uses the imagery of trades which involve messy, practical behind-the-scenes work transforming various raw materials into a neatly finished product that looks completely different from those raw materials. His enjoyment of this 'sleeves up' process is evident, and yet he says people want it to be more romantic and 'don't believe you when you tell them this' part of the process is so important (29).

### 6.2.4 Translation and the impact of physical environment and translation tools as situational variables

Van de Ruit works mostly on computer and puts this down to his age (51), although he does appear to write his earliest notes in a notebook[76] when he is still generating ideas for a new story or to sketch out rough plans for the structure of the book as described under 'organization' above. He also attributes his use of the computer to the way he does his reviewing, saying, 'I do so much…chopping and changing and deleting, adding' (51) and he needs to be able to look at each line and manipulate it into the right form as described under the reviewing process. The flexibility of word processing software for testing out different versions of a sentence or making instant changes is hard to deny.

He prefers a laptop to a computer because he is 'a bit of a nomad' and says this has been true since his writing of the first *Spud*, because he was on tour with his play, 'so it was the natural kind of machine' (51) and now he has started travelling between books and is often on book tours, so it has become what he is comfortable with (51). While he has a stable 'writing spot' for doing most of his long-haul writing and revising, he does a lot of the initial generating and planning while far away from home in a remote place where he cannot be easily contacted, once he has had a break backpacking or camping.

He is not particularly interested in a specific brand or size of laptop, explaining that he tends 'to write a book on a computer and then…get a new one'. He realises this might sound like he has 'got far too much money' but he feels as if his 'machine gets tired after a book' and each of the laptops he has used for each of his previous books has 'crashed' or 'semi-crashed' in the end (51). Thus he 'put them out to pasture' after the book has finished and gets a fresh one for the next book, and he keeps 'all these old laptops' at home. He is not particularly concerned about the attractiveness of his laptop, and describes his new one as 'quite a grotesque piece' (51). What concerns him is the simplicity and user-friendliness of the operating software as he 'hates the details of technology' (51).

He lived in his grandmother's (the infamous Wombat) flat in Durban up until 2010 and says he has completed most of his writing of all three books there 'in a little nook' that leads on from the lounge, and overlooks a garden and Musgrave Road. He liked to be able to 'watch the passing trade' and feels it will be 'quite weird, because

[76] To avoid confusion, I will be only using 'notebook' to mean an old fashioned notebook of the paper kind and not to mean a small laptop.

the fourth book won't be written there' as he has moved to the Cape (54). On his blog, he says he has 'Catch 22' posted on the wall 'faded but still brilliant'– one of the inspirational texts given to Spud to read by The Guv. As with the other authors, this stable, personalised base where the writing out of the book happens matches Csikszentmihalyi's description of an ideal environment for the part of the writing process that requires regular routine and few interruptions.

Also in keeping with Csikszentmihalyi's theory, when generating fresh ideas, he often breaks away to a place of exotic culture and natural beauty. With *Learning to fly* he apparently decided not to take his laptop to Vietnam because he wanted to 'cut loose' but did take a notebook along so that 'it the creative urge comes, … I can catch it all and then come home and write' (54). He packed a notebook with 'Spud 3, go, you biscuit' to try and cheer him up (5) and enjoyed the 'wonderful freedom of backpacking (5). When he went to an island on the coast of 'the South of China Sea' he wrote there at the resort 'with a veranda that just overlooked high above the ocean below and this jungle and it was just amazing and…all the things that, I think had been sitting there poured out of me' (5) and into his notebook.

When Van de Ruit is at home writing on his computer he can 'pump out sometimes 5000 words in a day, 4000 words' in a good five or six hour daily writing sessions (54). On a standard day, 'when I've got the bit between my teeth' 3 000 words a day is usual (54). However, he does this typing with only two fingers and he has 'to race to keep up with [his] brain because [his] brain is going and [he is] seeing the image and it's almost like a movie being played out' and he can see his characters in a scene and says he needs to be moving quickly so as not to get left behind these images in his mind's eye (54).

He took a travel break after our interview to backpack in Asia, but says that in 2010 he may 'go to the Kalahari again' and plan his final *Spud* book (54)[77]. The appeal of these remote destinations is that he 'love[s] a place where…people can't get hold of [him]' (54). So his important phases of generating new ideas and plans for a fresh book tend to be done where he is out of contact and undisturbed by anyone except his girlfriend, who appears to be his ideal writing companion as she is sensitive to his writing process needs.

In response to whether the kind of stationery he uses matters to him he said no, 'just give me a Bic pen and any pad' but apparently his girlfriend 'has an unnatural desire for stationery' and will buy him 'some strange looking book and packs all these pens' so his stationery is attractive because of her rather than through his personal choice. He proves his disinterest by saying when he wrote his first book he was on tour in Zimbabwe and he wrote 'in the hotel pad with the hotel pen and wrote the first page and I folded it up and put it in my pocket' (54).

[77] According to his blog he spent most of 2010 working on the Spud movie and a behind-the-scenes spinoff book. He has not yet started the fourth book.

Notwithstanding, he did mention that 'a pen has to have feel' (55) although this seemed to be more with regard to book signings as he signs so many books[78] that his wrist is in pain (55). Arguably the same pain would result from writing his average of 3 000 words a day if he were to write by hand, and questions of repetitive strain injuries a full time writer might incur arise and coincide with Beake's comments on the qualities of the ideal pens and paper in terms of ease of use.

While he feels he has 'always spelt reasonably well' his 'spelling ability has diminished, thanks to Spell Check' as he will now 'second-guess himself and knows the Spell Check will pick up any errors he makes (58). Perhaps this is a case of an automated skill becoming even more automated by being handed over as far as possible to the computer's software.

### 6.2.5 The significance of taking breaks

As mentioned above, Van de Ruit has taken an extended break at the end of each writing process for a variety of reasons. Not least of these is that he seems to need some distance from the publicity and a rest from the whirlwind of tours and book signings that the launch of a new book entails, but he also takes a paper notebook with him and allows any new ideas for the next book to emerge without any particular pressure and in exotic and peaceful surroundings, where he cannot be contacted or disturbed.

He came to this pattern of breaks between books as a result of the depression he fell into after completing the first *Spud* (17). He describes how he felt at this stage in the process as being like he imagined a woman might feel after childbirth:

> It is like a year out of your life and the burden gets heavier and heavier as you go on and then afterwards, there is this weird sense that you're separated. ….that is why I wanted to go overseas, because you just go "coom" [collapsing noise], "I'm going to try and let it go" and for at least a month, I didn't think about it at all – well, tried not to and every time I did, I'd throw it out my mind, but and that is why when people say, "When is the fourth?" It's like, "God, you want to get me pregnant already?" (17).

This feeling of collapse and a need to get over the separation from the completed book and not even 'think about it' (5) led him to take six months off before starting on the third book (5), a break he intended to repeat in 2010[79] before starting his fourth book.

Shorter breaks while writing the book are taken for similar reasons. At the rate he writes, he could produce a first draft of a book in around forty days, but after a day where he has written 5 000 words he will 'sometimes wake up the next day and feel washed out completely. I feel like I've just got nothing' (54) and then he will not work that day. At other times he will, like Orford, 'take a whole week off, or go

[78] 1,800 in 12 hours, by his count.

[79] He said he was going to leave South Africa to travel for some months in Asia again fairly soon after the launch of *Spud: Learning to fly* and the resulting tours, interviews and book signings. In fact, according to his blog postings on the Penguin website in 2010, he did not go from this break to writing the fourth book as his presence was needed for the filming of *Spud: The Movie* and the writing of a companion 'behind-the-scenes' book, to be released with the film in November 2010.

away' with his computer and write somewhere else where he cannot be disturbed. The planning of deadlines with his publisher and the freedom that the financial success of his books has brought, presumably help give him the flexibility he needs to maintain balance and not to descend back into either the depression caused by the intensity of the first book's writing process, or 'the madness' of the second book's process.

On a daily basis, in contrast to the other three writers, he writes from twelve noon and then once the sun has set he takes a particular kind of ritual break with his girlfriend after their reviewing session. During this break, he says he generally plays his guitar, sings songs and shares a whiskey or two with his girlfriend to 'unravel and sort of shed the skin' to unwind after a day's writing and release pressure when his 'brain is going crazy' (59). By the time they have their evening meal he says he has 'generally let it go' (59).

### 6.2.6 The impact of the domain and field

#### 6.2.6.1 Knowledge of the domain: skills and training

When it comes to training in writing, and learning the comedic skills mentioned above, while he learnt 'the basics' in his Drama and Performance studies, this university training 'doesn't guarantee' anything as 'most people who study Drama…become English teachers' (32) rather than playwrights or professional actors. His real 'comic university' was 'without a doubt…five years on the road doing…satirical theatre with a box of props, an audience of 200 every night….just [Ben Voss] and me…. On a bare stage with two chairs and we would make people howl with laughter for an hour and a half on good nights' (32). This was 'very tightly scripted' and 'originally [Van de Ruit] drove the scripting process (32) so his writing of comedy was strengthened by this experience and the feedback from audiences all over the country, which he still describes himself visualising when he writes his books.

The intensive acting period of his life constituted good training 'because it's all about rhythms and timing…and when you're writing, it's *exactly* the same' (32). He gave the example of 'the way… I work in threes, but every now and again ...the audience will be used to that rhythm of three, so I'm going to go rhythm of four' (32). He demonstrated this with the classic drum beat of a live comedy performance, where the final clash of the cymbals highlights the punch line of the joke and how he would alter the rhythm of the 'drum beat' leading up to that cymbal clash to play with the audience's expectations and further increase their enjoyment. He has learnt to 'dance with that or play with that' rhythm, and 'there's various different comedic shifts I use from slapstick to farce, to wit, to wordplay, to juxtaposition' (33).

It is clear from his descriptions that he has made both a formal and an informal study of comedy, as he has a much clearer-than-average vocabulary to describe specific types of humour and is aware of alternating between them in order to vary pace and style to make an audience laugh. However, this knowledge appears to be automated as he does not always 'rationally' decide where to use which method, but rather will 'just feel almost instinctively' what 'the situation demands.' He is strongly in favour of following instincts and not overanalysing his decisions, so sometimes the comedic technique he uses will simply be 'the one that comes to [his] mind first' (33). This

ability to trust his instincts is part of why he enjoys writing the diary organizing structure because, it is different from 'a thriller or a detective story where… you've got to be very cranial about what you release at what point' (33). In his case, if he releases too much too early on in the book, he can often 'undermine that by making it turn in a different direction' (33). He also uses his instincts to make decisions about plot development: 'If I'm getting bored then I feel the audience is getting bored. If I'm getting tired of a plot line, then I feel the … reader is getting tired of it, and instinctively, if I feel it's funny I have learnt to trust that it probably is funny' (33). Endless feedback from audiences to his humour while he was acting probably helped him develop this trust in his instincts and this is important for his ability to create and sustain the humour throughout his books.

He agreed that many of these skills had become automated, but added that some of his theatre skills were not so easily transferred to writing precisely because this frequent feedback is missing and he is forced to rely almost completely on his own instincts (and the feedback of the two people who read his ongoing work – his girlfriend and his editor). He describes this dilemma as follows:

> Whether you're telling a joke around the braai or writing it, or on stage performing it or you're a stand-up comedian, it's a high-wire act, because there's no middle ground. It either is funny or it isn't in that moment and obviously writing a book, you don't know in that moment, because you don't get to watch people reading, which I wish I did. I wish I could be a fly on the wall and see whether they laughed and that fascinates me…but it's so funny when people go, "Oh my God, your book cracked me up. That story with –" and they'll have some random story that I didn't event think was particularly funny (33).

It is quite possible though that the wide appeal of the *Spud* series could have something to do with the range of humour types he uses. Some jokes rely on fairly subtle literary inferential humour that depends on at least a basic knowledge of the books or Shakespearean plays he mentions in the interactions between the Guv and Spud. Others are the crude slapstick humour of the boys with Fatty's terrible farting and Boggo's endless bragging about his (inevitably non existent) sexual exploits.

Additional skills from his acting career, such as developing the intrinsically motivated professionalism of a good artist: 'we put a lot of pressure on ourselves…[and] we were very professional, never missed a gig…we would always arrive an hour before, we would have physical warm-ups, vocal warm-ups, …and I think people got a very good product' (32). This was doubtless important when it came to negotiating the publishing process with his second and third *Spud* books and his learning to stick to deadlines (4) when producing his manuscripts.

Van de Ruit's advice to young writers who are still at school is to 'just write, get it out there. Don't talk about writing, don't fear it, don't be insecure. Learn to handle criticism and commentary [and] try and open up your mind and let it go, let it happen…..Just allow whatever is in there, your guts, … to come from deep inside' (61). About teachers, he says that the 'great problem' is that they are principally interested in getting 'their kids to pass and then the way that we're taught is all wrong' (61). This is something he brings up in the third Spud when it is exam time and the teachers are issuing 'dire warnings of examination failure and its consequences' (Van de Ruit, 2009a: 370). He says this means that 'it's all about cramming and…the people who get A's at school'. He points out that he 'never got an

A for an essay, never' and that the really important thing with writing 'is to open up your brain and to debate the world and to challenge all that stuff'. He says that the teachers who challenge learners to think and 'argue about life and debate life and don't just take everything at face value' 'are the great teachers' (61). This is strikingly similar to Imraan Coovadia's saying that being able to think for himself was the most important skill to have as a writer.

#### 6.2.6.2 Knowledge of and access to the field

When it comes to managing the world of writing, publishing and then promoting a series of books as successful as the first three *Spud* books, Van de Ruit's was a sharp learning curve. As discussed earlier, he was hoping to get published but had heard how nobody gets published in South Africa and decided to focus simply on completing his manuscript. Not knowing where to start, (57) he sent his manuscript not to a publisher but to a theatrical director friend (Roy Sergeant) whom he describes as 'quite a big noise here and sort of a legend' as well as a 'mentor to [him] in playwriting' (57). He was simply hoping to get feedback but it was Sergeant who first predicted the popularity of the book. He said to Van de Ruit, ' "This is a bestseller; this is roll around on the carpet hysterical…[W]e put this in the right hands, this could be a massive hit" ' (57). Van de Ruit was naturally 'hugely excited by that' and the fact that Sergeant offered to get in touch with his old friend Alison Lowry, CEO of Penguin Books, and told her "I've got a book here you've got to read, trust me"' (57).

After this, he had to wait the standard four months for one of Penguin's readers to read the book and only then did he get word that 'they were excited' along with an email from Alison saying 'We're enjoying it. Don't give up hope, don't regard the silences as anything, it's just a process.' Later on they told him they were going to publish it but while they published an enthusiastic 4 000 copies[80] it was clear to him they weren't thinking it would be 'a huge smash hit' necessarily. Consequently, he feels that 'there was no real sense at the beginning that it was anything more than… perhaps something interesting' and in a way he feels pleased about this because while he had had his 'connection' in the form of Sergeant, 'it wasn't that much different to if I'd phoned them and said, "Listen, I'm an actor. I've written this book, can I send it in?" It could have gone through the same channels' (58). He does not feel he had any 'special treatment' even if Sergeant's recommendation may have meant he 'didn't go to the bottom of the slush pile' (58). He is probably right. While the interest of the publisher was no doubt piqued by the phone call from Sergeant, in South Africa's difficult publishing climate[81], it is unlikely that they would have published so many copies of a book, or even have published a book at all, if they did not believe it might sell. Publishing any book involves a financial risk for a publisher, and would not be undertaken on a whim as part of some personal favour to an old friend.

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[80] Alison Lowry (in Wilson, 2009) states that 'until Spud, a book that sold 10 000 to 20 000 copies was considered a best seller [in South Africa].'

[81] As mentioned by Orford and Beake and discussed in the press from time to time. However, Van de Ruit's record-breaking book sales raise the question of whether South Africa's reading market is the only problem. Possibly the field of publishing in South Africa needs to reconsider the kind of local books it publishes and promotes. Comic fiction might need to be taken more seriously, for example.

Where Sergeant's recommendation as a mentor was probably the most useful was in targeting the right sort of publisher for the book, as this may have saved Van de Ruit the rather painstaking and expensive process of sending out manuscripts to several publishers only to be rejected for not sending it to the correct imprint or to a publisher who does not look favourably on humorous books. After the book was accepted by Penguin, he still had to wait a further fourteen months before the book was published (58), pointing to the kind of delayed gratification that authors experience in completing the writing of a book.

He feels that his 'theatrical side' and his previous success with his plays may have meant he was 'able to get some nice press coverage from people who had always reviewed [him] and were naturally interested' but also says it was 'weird' to him how 'there was a little bubble that started and then caught fire' (58). One factor that undoubtedly played a role in the book's success, however, was precisely the cult following in schools that he had hoped for, although he had not anticipated the book's cross-over appeal to the teen market and the effect that English teachers might have on book sales. Not only has the first book been prescribed in many schools, boosting sales, he says 'English teachers are huge, because they not only spread to their kids, they spread to book clubs, they spread to other teachers, to parents… and it becomes viral' (58).

And yet this market is not guaranteed to anyone who writes for or about teens either, as Beake pointed out, and a book's success still depends largely on its appeal to readers, something Van de Ruit mentioned taking into consideration repeatedly during the interview, even though this was not aimed at sales but at creating scenes that an 'audience' or readership might enjoy. He has been compared to J.K. Rowling and says that her success is also 'amazing, but you know what? Her books are fantastic' (58).

Fame can be a double edged sword. It brings popularity and acclaim to boost an author's confidence, along with the financial freedom to write full time and to take his extended travel breaks. It is also encouraging to write for an audience of eager fans. However, it is taxing for a writer to have time and energy commitments to his fans and publicity duties have to be fulfilled with good grace, from signing 1800 books on one night, to signing a pile of nine books from a fan who has bought them in both hard and soft cover and being able to say 'I don't mind' sincerely because, as Van de Ruit says, 'You don't mind, because … that's nine books somebody's just bought' (55). While he 'quite enjoys' his fame (18), it is useful having 'the wonderful anonymity of being a writer' as opposed to a film star, because most people do not know what he looks like, and it can take a while for people to realise he is a celebrity.

The author has to balance public and private roles and Van de Ruit maintains that 'there are two me's in a way' as he has whirlwind book tours filled with all the trappings of celebrity such as limousine rides and 'amazing hotels, but after these periods, he will 'eventually just go back into being me… because the real me does not take myself that seriously. There is a lot of laughter going on' (18). He is able to laugh not only at himself but also at the people who 'are trying to take pictures and their hands are shaking' and he wants to explain to them 'Do you realised I wrote this book in my underpants? ...And I walk around singing and talking rubbish?"' (19). He feels people think he must have written the book in an exotic or romantic location 'but

the point is I am just a normal guy' (19) and he finds it difficult to 'reconcile those two – this author John van de Ruit guy and just Johnny, who is, for a lot of people, just a goon' (19). Although he does say he is 'a goon with a serious soul.'

While pointing out that many famous comedians such as Rowan Atkinson and John Cleese are in actual fact 'depressive people' he does not put himself in this category. Yet it is difficult meeting people's expectations in real life when he is not personally 'hilarious and that's the problem, these people think I've got to be a joke a minute' (46), just as people expect Orford to *be* the glamorous single blonde who is her main character.

To help him cope with some of the practicalities of being a celebrity, he has an 'army' behind him (Van de Ruit 2009a: acknowledgements) including the Cape Town publicist who makes a brief appearance during the interview. Van de Ruit is clearly charming and at ease around people, something that no doubt helps him cope with all the people around him when he is not able to escape to Asia or the Kalahari. He describes his publicist as 'basically my Mom while I'm in Cape Town – she takes me everywhere and makes sure the kids line up [and] don't storm me' (43).

However, the publisher provides pressures as well as support. He had to learn the hard way to negotiate the demands of a publisher who knows after the success of the first book that they are on to a good thing. As discussed earlier, he found the process of writing his second *Spud* book difficult to the point that he stopped enjoying it. He learnt he had to get deadlines committed to in writing to prevent their being pushed forward and even then Penguin tried to get his final draft out of him two weeks earlier than he had promised and he had to refuse as he needed this time (5). He was so confident for his last book that he says he 'did not miss a single deadline' and he 'felt like it was actually very comfortable' to the point that he was able to book a flight to Malaysia and hand over the final manuscript before he left (7). This tactic of negotiating deadlines involves mutual trust, built over time, that the publisher will not surprise him with extra pressure and that he will meet the deadlines he had committed to (7).

Another awkward aspect to fame and being a bestselling author is that there can be a backlash within the field from other authors or from literary critics, who see one's popularity as a sign that one's writing in some way *inferior*. Thus one part of the field can accept the products of your writing process while others can reject it. While he says he has 'bought [his] freedom and his 'ability to write more books and to write what [he] want[s] and to live a life that [he has] always wanted to live' (56) and so he does not mind that he does not win awards for *Spud,* on some levels it clearly rankles. He pointed out that many prizes for fiction in South Africa and in Africa in general go to more 'serious' books and (57) he feels that his treatment of serious questions of masculinity and youth in the dying years of Apartheid is not given credit for because he is lumped into the category of 'popular fiction' (57) and compared to other 'popular' but sometimes derided authors such as Dan Brown and J.K. Rowling[82] (47).

[82] While both Dan Brown and J.K. Rowling have been widely acclaimed by popular audiences and reviewers, they have not been acknowledged very often as literary successes within the field, particularly in South Africa. Dan Brown's *Da Vinci code* was spoofed by South African newspaper critic Eton…. Who wrote *The De Villiers code* 2005) satirizing the style and content of the book. JK

While it seems in the transcript that this was a heated discussion, it is important to note that Van de Ruit asked to move on from it, saying 'probably I've overstated the point, because I feel, to be honest, I've had a very, very clean ride and I don't think I've ever really had a hatchet job done on me.' It appears to be more a case that his 'publishers keep preparing [him] for it, especially at this juncture as he has launched his third book, and he says 'I think this third book is the best of the three. So I think it's going to be very hard for someone to go, ' "This is crap" ' (51). It is difficult for a writer to put their heart and soul into a piece of writing and have it judged harshly and probably doubly difficult for someone with training in literature, and an awareness of the potential legacy left by his books, to accept what he calls the 'othering' process by the field as a backlash to his popularity.

Part of the problem could be that comedy is 'so looked down upon. People see it as a secondary art, whereas actually to write angst is easy; to write comedy is bloody hard' (45). To him, comedy takes 'technique', while with angst, 'you can just pour it out of your guts' (45). While he maintains that it is easy to write about a topic such as domestic violence, if you 'turn that into something funny, it makes it sick, it makes it weird… but it gives it another layer (45). Comedy, to Van de Ruit, is 'the flip side of tragedy…it's just another cloak' and he likes to see it as 'the cloak which I wrap around *Spud* which gives it this lovely sheen of bright colours so that everyone goes, "Ooo, I want that… I am going to laugh and have a great time,"' while underneath the cloak there are the quite serious issues that he wants to address. His pride in his comedic craft has taken some blows from the domain as a result of a literary domain in South Africa being, apparently, anti levity.

### 6.2.7 Personal relationships as situational variables

Van de Ruit's girlfriend plays several key roles in his writing process. Firstly, she protects him from distractions that 'drag your brain away' from the writing, such as publicity and tax by handling these for him (4). When I commented that British author Terry Pratchett's wife apparently reads and sorts his post for him[83] , he said that he has chatted to a lot of 'successful authors whose spouses do that… and they… become very influential – so has Julia…become very influential in terms of being able to let me focus' (5).

However, his girlfriend does more than provide the space for him to focus. At the end of each day she is part of revision and generation processes as they read the day's writing together (59) and she has been part of 'every day's work' in his last book and 'is so precious about *Learning to fly*, more than the other books, because she feels a part of it. I've really brought her in' (59). He says she will ask questions about his writing and if there is something that she says that suggests a new avenue, then they will 'have a brainstorm' (59) around this new idea. To my knowledge, it is fairly

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Rowling's *Harry Potter* has been widely used in schools, but was criticized quite heavily by the lecturers of the Honours Children's Literature module I took at the University of Pretoria in 2000.

[83] The annotated Terry Pratchett file v9.0 – Words from the Master, 2003.

unusual for a writer to allow close family and friends into the writing process like this. Van de Ruit puts this down to 'arrogance and ego. You take ego and arrogance out and you can be a much better writer…and even guys who are already good writers, but are precious. If you take that preciousness out, they'll be even better, I guarantee you.'

His girlfriend is also part of the release of pressure and relaxation after each day's work (59) as described under taking breaks above. In addition, she is his travelling companion and so perhaps relieves what could be a lonely life with his cycle of book tours, intensive periods of writing and his six month travel breaks between books. It is important to his writing process to be in a stable relationship as he thinks '[Julia] and I have found each other in that way and it's really worked well,' although as with many other aspects of his writing process, this has come into its own in the third book. While he thanks Julia for her 'love and laughter and for reading The Madness…in nightly installments' in the acknowledgements of *The madness continues* (2007), his second book, he said in the interview that while he was writing this book he 'was still touring theatres' while Julia was 'staying at home' so it was more consistently during the writing of *Learning to fly* that they established this comfortable rhythm for his writing days.

When it comes to stability, even though Van de Ruit lives what he describes as a 'nomadic' life, he does seem to need uninterrupted time to work and he 'hates having something on' when it comes to his daily writing routine. He illustrates this by saying that if he had to meet a friend for lunch, he probably would not write on that day because he is 'not one of those persons who go, "Okay, I've got an hour and a half. Now I'm going to quickly shoot it down"' (60). He has met Alexander McCall Smith who he says is an author who can write on planes and 'he's writing three novels at once' but says he could not do this himself (60).

He does not live the stereotypical tortured artist life of 'sex drugs and rock 'n' roll' because 'I'm actually just quite a normal, regular guy. I don't have to claim to be artistic. I don't have to play the artist' (60). So while he says his 'brain works in strange ways' and he sees 'humour in just about everything, even in death, in funerals' and this might make him unusual, his not needing to pose as an artist is because he feels that

> when you don't take yourself incredibly seriously, then you realise that life is short and you do what you can and you throw out there whatever is in your heart and soul and your brain – that's all we can do. You can't try and pretend to be more than that' (60).

Van de Ruit does not have children and feels they could be a hindrance to his writing process. He said of having children: 'That would cause damage to my writing, my carefully honed thing' (60).

# Chapter Seven

In this chapter, key aspects of the creative writing processes are summarised across all four authors to examine how these observations engage the theories discussed in Chapter Two. The categories used for the interview analyses in Chapters Three to Six are preserved as far as possible for the sake of clarity, while additional areas of interest that emerged are highlighted towards the end. While there are numerous repercussions for this research in creative writing pedagogy[84] and this was a starting point for my interest in this topic of research, as mentioned in Chapter One, elaboration on this is beyond the scope of the thesis. However, mention is occasionally made to the implications of this research for creative writing novices. Finally, suggestions are made for further research in acknowledgement that this is a study of limited scope.

## 7.1 Authors' conceptions of the writing process: making and discovering meaning

While Flower and Hayes asserted that writers do not discover but rather make meaning through writing, writers in this study appear to feel that the writing process is a process of discovery for them (especially Coovadia and Orford). Yet they have a sense of agency in this discovery which corroborates Flower and Hayes' assertion indirectly: their descriptions of the writing process overall were not of accidental discovery of meaning but of the kind of discovery that takes effort and planning, similar to the discoveries made by the skilled Maori navigators Orford uses in her metaphor for her writing process.

The authors varied in the length and coherence of their descriptions of the overall writing process. Orford and Coovadia had well-developed metaphors for the writing

[84] One of the implications is that building learners' general knowledge around a topic so that they can engage meaningfully with a text is as important when it comes to writing as it is in reading in terms of building schemata. While a writer may not know what they want to write about before they start writing, the more experiences or stimuli they have the better for setting content goals, choosing rhetorical problems to solve, and generating ideas. Reading remains central in this regard, but not simply from the perspective of studying the content or style of stories. Rather this research suggests that reading for writing needs to be approached from a number of angles, such as an exploration of what a student personally enjoys and sees and effective writing and what content themes they find gripping. This implies exposure to a variety of prescribed works, and not simply the standard literary canon. It also implies a point at which learners are able to select their own books to read, identify favourite authors and develop self knowledge of personal preferences in terms of what moves them. Students need to develop the independent thinking and analytical or even intuitive skills to be able to get a clear picture of the kind of writing they might want to emulate or of themes they may want to research further (as pointed out by all four authors).

A further implication would be the need to avoid false standardization in teaching ideal writing attitudes is suggested by the more marked differences between authors in terms of when and how revision and evaluation, generation of ideas, breaks and level of co operation between author and editors or readers. Rituals, symbols, relationships, and writing process goals need to work for a particular individual rather and one should probably avoid generalized dictums such as 'all authors should write in mornings or have a collaborator' or 'never revise anything until you've completely finished your creative phase.'

process, with Orford in particular having a very structured description of how her writing process works. Naturally these summaries leave out important details and showed why further probing with specific focus questions based on literature study was essential. As Csikszentmihalyi (1997: 4) pointed out, in famous people's descriptions of their process, years of training and work are often 'telescoped' and only the highpoints or sloughs are remembered clearly.

Beake and Van de Ruit had less of a single overarching metaphor but nevertheless a clear idea how they worked, going into lot of detail early on in their descriptions. Orford and Coovadia's metaphors of navigation and bonsai cultivation implied skilled craftsmanship rather than simply talent, while Beake and Van de Ruit's descriptions also implied the development of their processes and expertise through trial and error and well-timed advice from others, in addition to following their own instincts.

Exploratory navigation, bonsai cultivation, imagining landscapes people populate, or dancing in a medium, not only involve people interacting with nature (the word 'organic' as a descriptor of process came up in Van de Ruit's interview and Coovadia's), but also express ideas of structure in motion, fluidity and steady movement, growth or rhythm and an element of unpredictability . These are not static metaphors, nor are they fast-moving ones. While more prosaic metaphors such as plumbing, a sausage factory and, most notably across authors, construction work, emerged later in the interviews when discussing some aspects of writing craft, the images that emerged to do with the overall writing process suggested overarching concerns with aesthetics and the adventures of exploration and cultivation.

All of the authors implied that a writer has to show up at their writing space and do the work required, and not simply wait idly for inspiration to strike. Yet there was also a sense of adventure - that one must make allowances for serendipity and the mysterious role of the subconscious in the creative writing process. Patience, stamina and a broad base of knowledge were important if a writing project is to succeed. Some explorations have to be abandoned, but there was a sense that this should be fairly predictable early on in the writing process if it involves the entire book, as the initial conception of the novel needs to be well planned if it is to sustain long term work in the face of inevitable setbacks. There is thus a surprising impatience with the idea of writers' block, with the implication that this was a potential waste of energy and time which the professional writer can ill afford.

Notwithstanding elements of surprise and serendipity, what emerges from these initial descriptions of the writing process is a sense of a process that these experienced authors feel comfortable and in control of. There is a sense that this awareness of and confidence in the writing process developed over time (most strikingly in John van de Ruit's case) pointing to the development of expertise through practice. When Berkenkotter's research revealed that Murray had many writing patterns internalized his long-term memory, this bothered him, as he felt it could indicate his writing process was in danger of becoming 'too glib, too slick, too professional, too polished' (1983: 171-172). Coovadia expressed a similar sentiment, but the other authors felt differently, seeing their increased confidence in their writing processes as a natural development based on accumulated experience.

## 7.2 The creative writing process

### 7.2.1 Planning

#### 7.2.1.1 Goal setting

Goal setting, as discussed in Chapter Two, is clearly a central driver of the writing process as setting goals or deciding which problems to solve determines motivation to write and intentions for content, style and writing process. In other words, goals determine what is written about and how the writer intends to go about writing about them. The choice of genre was also revealed to be part of the goal setting process as it is a choice the author makes in order to express content he or she feels strongly about (such as Orford's expression of an emotional truth she could not express in journalistic writing), as Csikszentmihalyi held. However, this complicates the Flower and Hayes model's characterization of the rhetorical problem as 'outside the writer's skin' and therefore part of the task environment rather than the actual cognitive writing process. In fiction writing the rhetorical problem is mostly generated by the author in response to personally determined content goals rather than to a topic from an outside source.

Initial problem conceptualization is vital to the goal setting process, as pointed out by both Csikszentmihalyi and Flower and Hayes. While the initial idea can be generated in the same way that later ideas are generated, with dramatic Aha! moments of inspiration or through research and exploration, these ideas are tested out in the initial stages of planning against the author's sense that they will generate the kind of content goals that will sustain a long term project such as a novel. This could be a key difference between writing shorter (shorter poems, articles) and longer pieces of writing (books, themed collections of poems, novels). While undoubtedly all ideas have to be tested against the author's inner sense that the idea is worth investing energy and time in, this must be even more vigorously examined in the case of writing that could take months, if not years, of the author's time (the average in this study was eight months to a year per book, with Coovadia taking considerably longer as he also works in academia). Beake mentioned needing a passion for one's subject as key to writing, while both Coovadia and Orford mentioned that the initial question or problem had to be very strong. It was in the early stages of exploring this question that writer's block could occur – after this, the implication was that the waste of energy and time for a professional writer could be too expensive to contemplate.

A point not picked up on elsewhere in the literature review for this study was how writers of series might differ in their content goal setting processes from other fiction writers. Van de Ruit and Orford have very narrow central thematic focus, derived from strong personal interests, driving more than one book in a series, and resulting coherent content and style goals that span three or more books. This strong underlying thematic pull could explain why they are able to and also why they chose to write series with core characters and even settings which remain the same across a number of writing projects, where each book cannot be said to follow an entirely separate writing process from the others. More than for Beake and Coovadia, these two authors have to sustain their energy and interest in their topics and characters, in addition to resisting and coping with outside deadline pressures, over many years as they have

committed to publishers and fans in advance. Beake is currently working on trilogies for the first time and is also experiencing this superstructure of goal setting.

While each fresh book has to be able to stand on its own in terms of many of its content goals, authors nevertheless have overarching themes and undercurrents stemming from deeply personal interests and perceptions of societal needs, whether they write series or not. Thus Coovadia's South African Islamic themes draw a common thread across three very different novels just as much as Orford's exploration of violence against women and children and her defense of the erotic span her series of thrillers where the main character's professional specialization makes these themes inevitable. Beake's interest in the universality of diverse children's experiences tie together books with topics ranging from the rural San in Namibia to street children in Cape Town, an only child of an archaeologist interacting with a girl of the same age dead for millennia and futuristic tales of environmental disaster. At the same time, Van de Ruit's strong interest in masculinity in South Africa spans not only his *Spud* high school diaries series, but also the topic for his drama Masters thesis and his plays.

Previous careers and studies revolve around similar themes, and thus the themes that drive content goals and problem setting for all of these authors could be said to be life themes rather than simply writing themes, inextricably tied to the writer's personal identity. Coovadia, exposed to a South African Islamic milieu and caught between youth under apartheid and post-apartheid immigrations, has woven his personal interests, travels and family narratives into his style goals for capturing accents and characterization, as well as his content goals. Beake was a school teacher and travelled widely as a result of her husband's job while launching her early fiction writing career. Orford was a journalist and commissioning editor, exploring the traumas of Southern African society that her studies of novelists, in similar oppressive systems to Apartheid, led her to admire. Van de Ruit's own developing masculine identity as an adolescent in a dominantly male school environment is perhaps the most obvious of the author's uses of autobiographical themes to drive content of their books.

This provides some research-based theoretical confirmation that typical injunctions in creative writing classes and textbooks to know oneself are probably worthwhile. No one can promise that they will lead to a novel of merit, but what they can perhaps guarantee a possibility of completing a novel, as a well-chosen topic that will sustain the writer's interest provides the motivation to sustain longer writing processes. There must, in other words, be some match between the world of the writer and the world they wish to create in a novel if debilitating writer's block is to be avoided. Csikszentmihalyi stated that 'while it lasts, creative writing is the next best thing to having a world of one's own in which what's wrong with the "real" world can be set right' (1997: 264) and the imaginary worlds that writers create appear to be as necessary to the writer as the physical world they actually inhabit, as they create a 'symbolic refuge' from reality (1997: 239).

The above observations on how central themes inextricably linked to an author's world view constituted overarching content goals correlated well with Csikszentmihalyi and Flower and Hayes. However, it also pointed out what both Csikszentmihalyi and Berkenkotter and Murray mention that Flower and Hayes'

context-stripped study could not account for, namely how long incubation time for problem setting or ideas generation can really take. This could corroborate Csikszentmihalyi's point that the 'Aha!' moment so famous in the creative process occurs as a result of a problem brewing in the creative person's mind for some time and then finding a solution so good that it is forced to pop into consciousness. Csikszentmihalyi's study showed this 'Aha!' moment to be the result of hours or more often years of mulling over a particular subject and this study's exploration of the content goals and generation of ideas of the participants supports this. Another surprise for Murray when he was studied was that the incubation time for generating ideas can take far longer than he had realized and this realization is probably not well developed in the authors of this study either as they described as inexplicable, spontaneous occurrences the arrival of ideas or characters clearly linked to the central thematic interests discussed above, which had been a preoccupation of theirs for a long time. The conclusion of this research is that writing does not occur in an isolated chunk of time separated from the rest of a writer's life, even if it may *feel* this way at times to a writer. This makes it difficult to answer the question 'when does the writing process start?' because writing is characterized as a cognitive process and not simply the physical act of putting words onto paper.

The choice of the genre of fiction (novels), not poetry, academic writing, journalism or play scripts as a goal has implications in terms of time commitments (and thus writing process goals) but also in terms of constituting both a content goal (the choice of genre sets certain problems for the writer to solve) and a style goal (prose as a style instead of poetic form). The participants were noticeably hesitant in describing themselves as necessarily in love with or obsessed with language in itself or with words. This contrasted with Csikszentmihalyi's claim that a love of words and language was essential to all writers (it is notable that he was generalizing mostly from poets in his study, and that Coovadia mentioned his friends who were poets were more interested in words and language than he was as a novelist). They were more interested in the overall effects of style and in ideas or content goals, and this could provide a clue to a difference between poets and novelists that is worth exploring in further research. Related to this is the key element of character development in novels, as they are crucial vehicles and for conveying ideas as well as filters through which facts are transmuted into convincing fiction, because they see the world through a particular lens and act in particular ways.

An aspect of the goal setting process that is difficult to pinpoint is how exactly an awareness of audience influences goal setting. Imagining a future readership does appear to influence style and content goal setting but this is limited to goals based on general principles such as using dialogue to break up a text and make it easier to read or avoiding spoiling a reader's enjoyment of a plot by presenting researched facts or personal experiences in ways that were out of character or out of keeping with the genre style, or being overly preoccupied with the truth where exaggeration might be more entertaining. There is thus a sense of taking a reader into consideration, quite possibly derived from what the author themselves feels makes a book good or bad, based on their own reading preferences. This supports Ong's argument (1975: 9) that 'the writer's audience is always a fiction in the sense that it is a mental construct and not a real person or group of people that can be clearly identified, particularly in the

case of novelists[85]. Atwood (2002: 49-50), a novelist and poet, further supports this position:

> For the tale-teller, the audience is right there in front of him, but the writer's audience consists of individuals whom he may never see or know. Writer and audience are invisible to each other; the only visible thing is the book, and a reader may get hold of a book long after the writer is dead.

As Orford pointed out, a book could also be read while the author is alive, but in another country. Furthermore, Ong (1975: 10) mentions, and Van de Ruit confirmed, editors and publishers may urge a writer to consider their audience as the 'real persons [who] will buy and read' the author's books, but realistically even publishers cannot have a very accurate idea who their successful author's readers are without conducting extensive and expensive research. The author has to make up his or her own mind as to what their audience wants or how they plan to affect them, sometimes *against* or in compromise with the advice of publishers and fans, as Beake and Van de Ruit do.

This supports Berkenkotter and Murray and Csikszentmihalyi as being closer to an accurate description of the complex and often indirect way that audience influences goal setting than Flower and Hayes who posited it as a crucial part of the rhetorical problem to the extent that it was built into their laboratory experiment's design from the start (a very specific audience was given along with the topic each writer had to write about during the protocol capturing process[86]). The authors in this study confessed to often having no idea who their readers actually were and pointed to the impossibility of in any real sense 'knowing' the tastes of a readership of many thousands across more than one country. A notable exception was Beake, who writes for a very specific target audience and makes a study of this audience while writing to check responses to her work. This could be a function of writing for an audience far removed from her in terms of age and circumstances. However, for her, as for the other authors, the readers' responses they do hear of are sometimes a surprise. Readers may laugh where the author did not intend this or seem to strongly desire closure where none was given in a book. Where the response seems clear, the author may incorporate it into future style goals, as when Van de Ruit accepted his publisher's appraisal of his readership's desire to see a continuation of the fart jokes in his latest *Spud* books, or when Beake created a new goal of always having a resolution to her stories for young people after the responses she has witnessed to *Strollers.*

Pace of plot development and frequent climactic moments were a critical style concern for all of the authors, as this keeps readers interested, whether in the humour of Van de Ruit's schoolboys' antics or the suspense of Orford's thrillers. Beake mentioned how young readers want action on every page of a book, and Coovadia,

[85] Further supported by Elbow in his 'Argument for ignoring audience' (in Corbett, Myers and Tate, Eds. 2000: 335).

[86] Such as teenaged girls who are readers of a particular magazine.

Beake and Van de Ruit said dialogue was important to break up the text for readers because it is easier to read than solid blocks of text.

As with the audience, the topic of a book is usually generated by the author – even in the case of Beake's books, as she is only rarely given a theme like soccer for 2010 and mostly decides on topics for herself. The idea of a topic provided by an outsider could be part of the university paradigm in which Flower and Hayes conducted their research. While in the world outside the pedagogical institutions of school and university, this situation may exist, such as when journalists are given a very closed news topic to write about by an editor, with a well market-researched audience, this element might need re-characterizing as part of the goal setting process for a creative writing process model as it does not ring true for the fiction writing processes examined in this study (or Csikszentmihalyi's). The centrality of the rhetorical problem to the goal setting process and the personal nature of this choice of rhetorical problem as well as the mental construction of the audience by the author point to these elements being very much inside the writer's mind, part of what Orford described as an author's 'totality of vision' and which Coovadia called his internal sense of precision, in contrast to Flower and Hayes' modeling of these factors as something external that the author has to respond to.

There is much evidence to support Berkenkotter's addition of style goals as a distinct category missing from the goal setting process of the Flower and Hayes model. These particular goals center around desired effects of the writing on readers as well as on books the authors had read that they either admired and wished to emulate, or disliked and wished to avoid copying. This could furthermore link to Csikszentmihalyi's discovery that a perceived gap in the domain is strong motivator in choosing style goals in particular, as all of the authors mentioned wanting to convey something in their own unique style or an existing style in other countries' literature that they were adapting to the South African context. In other words, they were setting a style goal driven by a perceived gap in their particular genre of fiction in South Africa which they wished to remedy.

There was an awareness of the different style needs of fiction versus sociology (mentioned by Orford), psychology (mentioned by Coovadia), academic writing (mentioned by Van de Ruit) and magazine writing (mentioned by Beake). An important style goal for all of the authors was to transmute their personal experiences or research into writing that was at once honest, readable and interesting and at the same time possessing some authenticity beyond these autobiographical experiences or research.The authors felt that other forms of prose or non-fiction writing, in their experience, were somewhat easier in terms of style requirements than fiction writing. The feeling appeared to be that research did not need to go through quite such a dramatic transformation process in other forms of writing as it does in fiction. In fiction, information is not reported on in a straight-forward way, or transformed through commentary and analysis, but rather integrated seamlessly into the story and made to appear a natural part of it through characterisation. Attitudes, values, ideas and facts are filtered through the personality of a fictional character and demonstrated through sensory imagery, actions and dialogue in a way that connects with a reader on a more visceral level than perhaps a journalistic text, for example, can achieve. This supports the often-quoted rule for writers of 'show, don't tell' (Keats, 1999: 21) and

Orford described this as a kind of alchemy achieved through distillation, indicating that this could indeed be a strong determiner of style goals for novelists.

Writing process goals were set in addition to style and content goals, in accord with the Flower and Hayes model. As the writers' descriptions of their creative writing processes indicated, they had developed systematic, even ritualistic ways of progressing from initial problem setting through to a completed, published book. Writing process goals included any strategies that would help support content and style goals, and were individually determined, although some, such as the goal of writing at a particular time each day, had been learnt from mentors or teachers. As discussed further in the processes that follow, particular strategies such as following a particular pattern to ease the writing process, while consciously breaking the pattern in order to curtail boredom for both writer and reader, could all be characterized as writing process goals, as could the decision to listen to music, conduct research or go on a retreat as a strategy for generating emotion while writing.

#### 7.2.1.2 Generating

Ideas were generally generated in ways that were in harmony with the goals the author described. Research as a method of generating material was conducted either through reading non fiction material; through first-hand research either of facts, professional behaviour and procedures (as in Orford's research on forensics); or through a process of observation of a particular place or group of people to absorb accents, atmospheres and other aspects that would lend authenticity and vividness to fictional work (as in Van de Ruit's trips to Michaelhouse, Coovadia's note-taking on accents, Beake's trips to the places she uses as her settings, or Orford's visits to prisons). Beake, Orford and Coovadia conduct fairly intensive research, either first hand or through non-fiction reading; Van de Ruit, who uses his own school and family life as inspiration, is the exception[87].

There is also considerable evidence of the impact of information stored in long term memory on the generation of ideas, including the seemingly mysterious and spontaneous flashes of insight and inspiration called 'Aha!' moments by Csikszentmihalyi. As mentioned previously, the long term memories of the author appear to cluster around themes which stem from past personal experiences from school, family life, travels or jobs, coupled with wide reading of both fiction and non-fiction that stimulated the interest and admiration of the author. These themes are often the source of the initial idea for a book and then form part of the solutions to the various problems of plot and character development, choice of setting, etcetera. When new ideas generated by research or in response to text, or readers' needs or the author's stylistic plans, are combined with information and ideas in the long term memory, inspired generation of ideas can result, sometimes in a way that even surprises the writer. These ideas are often fresh and creative and appear new even to the author precisely because they stem from their long held memories combined with new research at the right time. As Csikszentmihalyi described, it is likely that these

[87] Using one's own school and family life as inspirational material has its own challenges and this, coupled with his celebrity status in South Africa, leaves the author faced with intensive public quizzing by readers and assumptions made by them about what is 'truth' and what is 'fiction' in his work.

combinations can be formed in the subconscious mind, often during the all important process of resting or conducting mundane, unrelated tasks such as walking in between transcription, planning or reviewing processes, and because the 'fit' is so good as a solution to the problems the author needs to solve in their writing, they pop into conscious thought like a cork under pressure, giving that elating feeling of surprising and spontaneous inspiration 'from nowhere'.

It seems that Csikszentmihalyi has found the reason why fortune favours the prepared when it comes to inspiration – these ideas do in fact come from 'somewhere', even if the author does not *experience* it in this way. This indicates that a person with rich and varied life experiences might be more likely to be able to combine this with current writing needs and come up with inspired prose than someone either very young and inexperienced, or someone who has lived a very stable, routine existence with few challenges. It might also explain how age is an important difference between experienced and novice writers of full-length fiction. The rich matrix of interconnected ideas needed for the non-linear, developmental, dynamic and often messy process of ideas is built up over time in writer's long term memory. It also highlights once more how the cognitive processes involved in creative writing are not easily reduced to a simplistic stage model.

It could also help writers if they are acutely aware of some or other theme(s) over their lifetime that emotionally engage them, as this could help the long term memory to store information in a way that is readily retrievable for fresh combinations and inspiration when needed. According to this perspective, truly irrelevant connections dissolve and disappear from memory, while the ones that are robust survive long enough to emerge eventually into consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi 1997:101). This was backed up by how Beake and Orford often did not need to refer back to diagrams or notes used to generate ideas or organize them – the process of writing the notes was, it seems, often enough to process the ideas and settle them into the long-term memory. Orford also said that spontaneous flashes of inspiration that could not be immediately translated onto paper or recorded in some other way would only be lost if they were not particularly good.

Related to this emotional engagement with a particular topic was how intense the identification with some characters can be for fiction writers, regardless of whether the character is autobiographical or not. The dictum that life influences art appears to be true, and as discussed above, and Csikszentmihalyi's idea that art can be a way to improve an imperfect world and to even provide therapy for past experiences appears to have evidence to support it. All of the authors based characters on some real people in their lives in one way or another, but what could be more fully explored is the reverse – how art influences life as writers create and immerse themselves in the world of a fictional character to the point that either they or people who interact with both them and their writing confuse reality with fiction. Orford explains how she is often confused with Clare Hart until people meet her, and the photos for a 2010 *Words etc* journal article for her as well as her publicity shots on her website cast her in the role of not the author but the sexy sleuth who is her main character. She has taken up jogging and given up smoking, influenced by Clare, while she has made Clare give up whisky in favour of wine, Orford's preference. Van de Ruit blogs that he receives fewer birthday wishes than his autobiographical creation Spud and that his mother has reworked her memories of his teenage years to include her distress at a

suspension from school that never actually happened to Van de Ruit at all but which happens to Spud. He was also so strongly influenced by writing Spud's grief at his friend's death that he went into a depression, despite the fact that this was an entirely fictional event affecting a fictional character.

While reading other books led to the generation of ideas as well as style and content goals, all of the authors apart from Coovadia avoided reading fiction while they were writing a book, saying that this interfered in some way with their writing process. For Orford, it was a matter of reading published books discouraging her when she was still trying to get her own book into shape; for Beake and especially Van de Ruit, it was a fear that they might mimic the style or content of the books they loved and thus interfere with the generating of fresh ideas and styles. By contrast, Coovadia enjoyed keeping a select group of books as a reading project parallel to his writing project and felt this was 'exciting' and enriched his writing.

Coovadia and Van de Ruit listened to music intentionally while writing and this 'soundtrack' finds its way into their books but also appears to be part of creating the writing atmosphere for generating ideas as it creates a particular emotional mood and can form part of the imagining of characters. Similarly, in Beake's *Hap* file she kept lists of music she was listening to which she thought one of her characters might also have listened to. Even though this did not end up directly written into the book it formed part of her conceptualisation of the character. However, when it came to such deliberate attempts to stimulating the subconscious, the use of 'right-brain' and other creativity-stimulating techniques and activities popular in the media, creative writing textbooks and creative writing courses, and the use of workshopping, was strikingly limited in these authors. They seemed only vaguely aware of and not terribly interested in these methods and Beake declared them 'very complicated' to use as part of her writing process. Coovadia says that if he uses them it is only by accident. Orford uses free writing and morning pages, but in a way she has evolved for herself; she has not actually read up on these techniques and appears to have, for instance, heard of the work of creativity coach Julia Cameron only second-hand.

Coovadia may have automated these devices as he learnt about them through his experiences with creative writing programmes at American Universities and Van de Ruit may have similarly automated creative techniques learnt through his acting and playwriting studies. Beake, Coovadia and Orford have conducted writing workshops, so may have incorporated some workshop techniques for stimulating creativity into their working methods. This may indicate that such activities could be important to novice writers, while experts may pare down their creative writing process to save energy expenditure and come up with the most elegant solution to their individual needs. Photos, hand written notes, inspirational reading projects, first-hand observation, research and music are all used, but transmuted into personal rituals or patterns to create an emotional state or mood while writing about a topic or character and to provide triggers for generating ideas.

Thus novice writers need not reject creativity workshop techniques as not something real authors do but rather might need to explore and develop and eventually automate what works for them and discard what does not. A potential difference might be that novices need more outside stimuli and learning which techniques work for them, and perhaps just as importantly, might need to develop an awareness of which strategies

are superfluous or even unhelpful as they learn to conserve creative energy and only use the tools they require or which are meaningful to them.

While all the authors except perhaps Coovadia seemed to enjoy working with editors, agents and so forth, none of them appeared to use collaborative workshopping for ideas generation, although Van de Ruit's sessions with his girlfriend and editor could potentially come under this description. Orford attends writing workshops occasionally, but transforms the workshop to suit her own needs by actually going in the persona of her character, rather than as herself. Simple techniques seemed to be most favoured for stimulating the subconscious, in keeping with Csikszentmihalyi's observations: naps or semi-wakened states of rest, walks, time in nature, gardening or listening to music. These are easy to overlook as simply things that ordinary people do all the time as part of the rhythm of daily life. However, the authors set some store by these activities as part of their creative writing process as did the creative people in Csikszentmihalyi's study. Perhaps this is part of the personality of the particularly creative person, or perhaps it is true of all people, but it is worth considering that the subconscious is never very far away and it may simply need some gentle coaxing or 'air space' to be connected to, rather than any complicated rituals. Simple meditation strategies that fit in with a person's daily life might very well be as effective as a whole gamut of collages, sensory stimuli and other workshopping techniques. However, for less confident novice writers, still developing an awareness of what best triggers their connection with the subconscious, these creative workshops could provide a range of techniques to get them acquainted with their creative subconscious or intuitive power until they feel comfortable enough to engage with this aspect of the cognitive process of creative writing in simpler ways more suited to their individual needs.

#### 7.2.1.3 Organizing

All four authors had different strategies for organizing material in such a way that it was readily accessible while they were writing and also easier for a reader to follow. Some of this organization happened inside the writer's mind as Flower and Hayes suggested, but some followed sophisticated organizational tools on paper or computer that facilitated and interfaced other aspects of the writing process such as evaluation of the text that could signal the need for further generation of ideas, or the formulation of a goal to solve a new problem emerging from the next.

When it came to complex plot organization across novel writing, all the authors sought out mechanisms either built into the content and process goals, such as finding a simple envelope for the story line, or following unfolding of time sequences in a particular pattern. However, avoidance of formula that would potentially lead to boredom was an overriding writing process goal that controlled this organizing structure: none of the authors, especially the ones committed to series, wanted to fall into the pitfall of producing predictably formulaic plots. Furthermore, from a style goal perspective, any repeated organizing structures in Orford and Van de Ruit's series were carefully managed to create an enjoyable anticipation for the reader which could potentially be undermined for a surprise effect. All of the authors spoke about how a simple basic structure to the overall plot was useful but ease had to be balanced with interest if it was not to become both a mechanical piece of writing (Coovadia, Beake) or a boring, mechanical process (Orford, Van de Ruit).

As discussed previously, character development is a means of expressing content goals and a mechanism for generating ideas and transforming raw information from research, personal experience or long term memory into more creative text. However characters also drive plot development for Orford, Coovadia and Van de Ruit and as such they are a powerful organizer in the emerging text. Time and pace is also all-important to all the authors, and this was often mapped in some way, either in the author's mind or diagrammatically, to help determine what had been written and what was still required. Tracking devices such as tables, chapter heading lists and others were used by Orford, Beake and Van de Ruit, but not explicitly by Coovadia. It is possible that he holds such tracking devices in his mind or through repeated revising processes he becomes so familiar with his emerging novels that he does not need to express these organizational tools in physical form.

When Berkenkotter was studying him, Donald Murray expressed surprise at the extent of the recursion of subprocesses and their embeddedness, noting that much of what he thought was a revision phase was in fact planning in the sense of reorganizing ideas and generating new ones to fill perceived gaps between intention and actual text. This was ratified by the organizing mechanisms that Beake, Orford and Van de Ruit demonstrated in their writing notes. Their storyboards and graphs plotting characters' development throughout the book had been written not before the novel was begun but often after the first full drafts had been completed or even mid draft, once the emerging text had become perhaps too large and complicated to grasp inside their minds alone. They were plotting and reviewing the emerging text's overall organizing structures in order to plan what still needed to be written, altered or left out.

### 7.2.2 Reviewing: evaluating and revising

According to Flower and Hayes, good writers are constantly evaluating and reformulating their goals as they generate new ideas and organize these ideas into prose. This means that reviewing will not only lead to the revision of words on the page or concepts in the writer's mind, but also to an evaluation of the goals that are driving the writing itself. In keeping with this, it was clear in the research for this thesis that the reviewing process is as important to the creative writing process as the generation of ideas is. While people tend to privilege generation of ideas as the inspired, creative part of the writing process, it is often through evaluation and revision that new ideas are generated. The reviewing process is where problems that need to be solved through generation are discovered and as such is essential to all the creative planning processes of goal setting, generation and organization.

This study's participants confirmed Flower and Hayes and other composition studies researchers' assertions that reviewing takes place throughout the process rather than simply at the end. While all the authors advocated some form of 'free-writing' without conscious evaluation at various times in the generating and organizing of ideas, and final polishing and refining at sentence and word level may happen towards the very end of the process, there was evidence from both their interviews and the notes shown by Beake and Orford that even some word-level proofreading happens throughout the process, if authors spot an inaccuracy as they go along. More global evaluation such as the rejection or acceptance of a new idea, is happening all the time, as is revision of text as new ideas are integrated into the existing text. From the first

idea for a book or character, some evaluation or revision is taking place as the author accepts, rejects or adapts everything from a character's name to an overarching plan for plot structure. This can have the same spontaneous feeling as the Aha! moments of generation, where the author describes a 'gut' evaluation, as Van de Ruit did when he selected characters' names, or Orford accepted the idea of Clare Hart as her heroine, or their choice of one particular word or phrase over another at any time. Once again the actual spontaneity of this evaluation as experienced by the author might require further scrutiny as it is very possibly also a result of years of reading and evaluating other people's writing and absorbing this judgment into the long term memory.

As Malcolm Gladwell describes in his book *Blink* (2005), the more expertise someone has in a particular field, the quicker they are able to evaluate a particular situation or product so that it can appear to be a completely spontaneous 'gut' response. Similarly, the more experience and author has of both reading and writing, the more finely tuned they will be to the processes of evaluating and revising in a way that allows for these judgments to feel spontaneous. As Flower and Hayes and Berkenkotter and Murray point out, these responses can be so highly automated as to be forgotten very quickly by the author, as they resolve one problem and move on to the next. The interviews in this study indicated that major revisions, especially structural ones or critical decisions with far-reaching consequences, such as character or setting choice, are easy for an author to recall, even if they cannot explain where or why exactly they made these evaluations or revisions On the other hand, the smaller details of the reviewing process are naturally impossible to recall or even to see as important enough to mention[88].

All of the authors devoted a significant amount of their writing time to revisions conducted either daily (as in Van de Ruit's case) or after a significant amount of text had been generated (as in Orford or Coovadia's cases), or both. Where the authors were divided was on how this revision physically took place (on screen or on paper) or where (as part of their regular writing routine in their usual writing space, or in a new environment on retreat, as in Orford's case), and whether or not they allowed other people into the reviewing process. All of the authors are published, which means that once a completed manuscript has been handed over, it is proof-read and copy-edited by an outsider. However, many more significant revisions to the book take place before this external process occurs. Van de Ruit was the most open to outside influence of all the writers, and put this down to not allowing his ego to interfere with the process. He reviews his writing on a daily basis with his girlfriend and takes her comments and questions on the daily evolving text into consideration. Beake allows different people in for different books, such as archaeologists for her book *Hap*, but says this is at the level of fact-checking rather than her creative ideas generation. She often has children she is writing about read her work, as when she had street children and deaf children read her emerging novels *Strollers* and *A cageful of butterflies* respectively. This appears to be in order to check the authenticity of the characters and their resonance with similar real people as she is not writing from personal experience and writes across cultural, racial, age and gender divides.

[88] Apart from, perhaps, Van de Ruit mentioning continually spelling 'aisle' as 'isle' in one book. The fact that his editor teased him about this repeated error seems to have led to a little embarrassment on Van de Ruit's part, and this is an emotive response that would help set the correction of this mistake in his memory.

However, Orford only allows her agent and/or her publisher to view her work at the very beginning when she writes a synopsis or once she has reached the very end of a novel. While she takes their comments and queries very seriously and will continue to revise heavily after receiving them, she does not allow them or any family or friends into her reviewing of a text for the bulk of her writing process. Coovadia was the most distant from any outside influence, saying he did not know what to do with outside commentary and preferred to review his work against his own inner criteria.

There is a striking awareness of the number of words written or cut out when discussing evaluations and revisions across all authors. This is easily tracked using word processing software so could be a relatively recent phenomenon and one not so easily employed as a strategy at the time of Flower and Hayes or Berkenkotter and Murray's research. The counting of words appears to function as a simple measuring device for evaluating writing progress as well as a mechanism for pulling the author through the writing process as it provides a clear goal to work towards (such as 'I need to write so many words a day to feel I am making progress', or 'I need to cut back to so many words in order to tighten up the plot'). As the creative writing process requires much emotional and intellectual energy, it can be draining, and authors seem to resort to relatively simple tricks that conserve energy. As Flower and Hayes suggest this happens through the automation of skills, and where word processing software can help with automating tasks such as revision of spelling or the evaluation of progress on a basic level of quantity of words, the authors make use of this. However, this comes down to a matter of personal taste, and some programmes such as 'track changes' are less popular than others, and reviewing of text in hardcopy was also carried out by Orford, Coovadia and Beake.

It is often held that revision and editing are the non-creative parts of the creative process, when cold rational judgment leads the mental process, to the point that some writing courses I have attended have had class notes referring to this aspect of the writing process (often called 'editing') in the stage model paradigm as 'post writing' as if it is not part of the creative writing process at all. In this characterization, evaluation and revision are the painful drudgery that happens after the fun of creative ideas generation is over. Csikszentmihalyi pins the blame for writer's block here, saying that the free-flowing discovery process of the evolving text has to be 'monitored by the critical eye of the writer' (1997: 263). This requires the mind to focus on two contradictory goals: 'not to miss the message whispered by the unconscious and at the same time to force it into suitable form'. The first process depends on openness, while the second requires critical judgment, and writer's block could result if this constantly shifting balance is not maintained (1997: 263-264). It is also exhausting as it requires tremendous concentration.

However, the idea that reviewing is not enjoyable could be a dangerous misconception. In fact, all of the writers in this study said they enjoyed the reviewing process, which is fortunate as it takes up a significant portion of their time. It is also happening more or less simultaneously to nearly every other part of the writing process apart from perhaps the subconscious generation of ideas during periods of incubation when, by all accounts, judgment is switched off. It appears to be the rational conscious mind that analyses and judges. However it seems that the process of reviewing is also creative and driven by the same goal setting processes, even if in a different way to the mysterious subconscious generation. Revision also leads to

generation in many ways once the writing process is under way. It is through revision that a writer spots where more ideas are needed, or new words, different characters or better metaphors. If an author feels like laughing when evaluating a scene that should make her weep, perhaps she will decide this is a better way to get her point across and she will revise the scene to make it even more satirical (in other words, reconsider how her style goals might better serve her content goals). Orford pointed out how polishing one's writing on even the mundane level of spelling and punctuation can help one refine the work in other ways – spotting a phrase that clangs where a whisper is desired– or choosing a better word through a slip of the hand.

It is in revising that many of the exciting challenges of writing lie, and there is much satisfaction and enjoyment to be derived from finding that perfect solution to a problem. It could be helpful to consider this when teaching or embarking on writing. There is no point characterizing reviewing as a dull and dutiful part of the writing process, to be put off until the very end of a 'creative phase' if in fact it is an essential and stimulating part of the entire process. A writer who does not derive some satisfaction and enjoyment from the revision process could be in the position of a sailor who suffers from seasickness.

Proofreading for spelling and punctuation and other local errors was something the authors did as part of presenting a polished product, although for Coovadia notably this was something he is so skilled at he does not recall making errors of this kind at all. Beake corrects any errors she sees as soon as she indentifies them, while Orford admits that she finds it terribly difficult to see her own spelling and grammar mistakes, even in the final stages of the revision process, and relies heavily on the publisher's copy editors for this. Orford and Van de Ruit left proof reading their work until after they had reviewed nearly all other aspects of their work, while Beake and Coovadia were so bothered by even small errors that they would correct these as soon as they spotted them. Coovadia and Van de Ruit were most concerned with poor word choice or sentence structure, and this was a level of detail that all the authors were interested in, whatever their professed spelling and grammar ability and interest. All agreed that a high level of technical facility with language is helpful to writing and seemed to concur with Orford's assertion that one polishes a work in all sorts of ways, including at word level, when one evaluates and revises it repeatedly.

Orford, Beake and Van de Ruit draw organizational diagrams that are as much tools for reviewing the development of the book's plot and for tracking characters as they are planning tools, once again pointing to Flower and Hayes and Csikszentmihalyi's assertion of the recursiveness of the processes involved in creative writing. Coovadia prints out his work once he has completed a full draft of the book, and then works straight from the printed document back onto the screen, reviewing without filing or diagramming his book's development. He repeats this process a number of times, presumably forming a clear picture of the book's structure in his mind through this repetition of the reviewing processes. His use of other documents and footnotes, open simultaneously to the main manuscript document, is how he keeps notes for future revisions and of problems requiring resolution.

Beake, Orford and Van de Ruit greatly valued the contributions of their editors and Orford and Van de Ruit in particular enthused about this outside influence on their final revisions and how co-operative they were with their editors. Coovadia, by

contrast, tries hard to find editors who will interfere with his work as little as possible and feels once he has handed the book over he is only prepared to make minimal changes as the book is 'glued shut' in his mind at this point in the writing process. His own internal sense of precision guides him, derived in part from the input he received on his first novel and from his reading. These differing levels of engagement in collaboration and the different values placed on the role of collaborators has implications that allowances should be made for different personality times and temperaments, life experiences and so forth, for example, Coovadia's negative experiences for first few books may have shaped his lack of desire for collaboration for later books, whereas Van de Ruit's overwhelming success and Beake and Orford's previous work as editors and journalists prepared them for a different attitude to collaboration.

### 7.2.3 Translating and physical environment

This research confirms observations by Berkenkotter and Murray that it is worth looking into the details of situational variables, and that this was a significant omission from Flower and Hayes' study. There was support from the interviews for Csikszentmihalyi's hypotheses that physical environment can have an impact on the creative process, but this needs expanding on as equipment in addition to spatio-temporal and affective concerns could influence the writing process. Pens, computers, paper and notebooks, can all facilitate or hinder smooth and speedy translation of all the other writing sub-processes into text or diagrammatic form. While the authors displayed varying levels of attachment to their particular transcription tools, with the men ostensibly rather disinterested and the women[89] intensely interested in the aesthetics and quality of their computers, notepads and other stationery, the ability of the transcription tools to work efficiently and quickly so that transient thoughts could be quickly captured, was emphasized to some degree by all the authors.

Questions such as portability also enter into the equation if the writer needs to change environments in keeping with the rhythms and needs of their particular creative writing process. In addition, aesthetic and personalized, even ritual aspects are of importance, so a treasured writing implement (which could be a pencil in preference to a pen, a specific brand of notebook or a laptop) that fits a particular writer's identity could do much to help the author access the mental space they need in order to feel creative and inspired or simply dedicated to another four hours' work. While Van de Ruit and Coovadia claimed no particular interest in the tools of their trade, it was noted that Coovadia has a very good quality, stylish computer and iTunes to play his music on while writing, and has thus invested significantly in his working space, while Van de Ruit feels the need for a new laptop for each new book, indicating a sense of ritual new beginnings[90]. Van de Ruit claimed a pen had to work well

[89] This interesting gender difference could be something worth exploring, but could equally turn out not to be gender-related at all. It is impossible to say with only four authors involved in the study.

[90] While he said this was because each computer seemed to 'crash' at the end of a book, there are other ways around the problem and it is significant that he saves the laptops. Prolific UK author Terry Pratchett clears his hard drive completely once each novel has been published and so does not feel the same need for a new computer for each book. Orford also works on a laptop and does not change computers between books.

especially for the book signings he performs, as he is in pain after a day of this publicity work. Arguably the same pain would result from writing his average of 3 000 words a day if he were to write by hand, and questions of repetitive strain injuries a full time writer might incur arise and coincide with Beake's comments on the qualities of the ideal pens and paper in terms of ease of use. There is thus an indication that it could be important to balance practical factors (such as the portability and processing speed of a laptop computer) with personal considerations (patterns of aesthetic values, semiotics, sense of belonging to a mythical community of other artists, personal interests and identity) for translation (and other processes) to be optimized.

Apart from Beake's injunction that her computer is beautiful because 'if you work on something all day, you should work with some pleasure', there was the interesting match between the physical spaces these authors wrote in and what they said about their goals in their writing. Coovadia's study contains a number of decorative items from India and the Orient. He also keeps his work as a novelist physically separated from his work at the University of Cape Town by working at home on his writing and in his office at the university for everything else, just as he believes he should keep his writing process separate from his creative writing students. Orford said at a festival that she sometimes wishes she were more like the glamorous, single, heroine of her thriller series, with her minimalist existence. In strong contrast to her family home, filled with the trappings of a busy family, she has a writing studio in her garden, in which she indulges her fantasy of minimalism and solitude while she writes.

As Csikszentmihalyi postulated, all the authors in this study had personalized spaces in which they did most of their writing work. These environments both reflected their writing styles and goals, and provided a secure place where they could concentrate on their writing undisturbed. Regularly used writing spaces all had good views, either of mountains, the sea or both (for Coovadia, Beake and Orford) or of a pleasing street scene (in Van de Ruit's case). At the same time, all sought out novel environments on occasion. Orford and Van de Ruit like to remove themselves from their familiar surroundings to remote retreats where they are not contactable for particular stages of their writing process: Van de Ruit at the start of a novel when he needs a break from the previous book and wants to generate fresh ideas; Orford when she needs to gain fresh perspective in the reviewing part of her writing process. Orford and Beake also appeared to occasionally enjoy a change of scene from their quiet workplaces at home to the more social milieu of a coffee shop or restaurant. All of the authors travel fairly frequently, either to places which are key to the generation of ideas through research, or, as is the case with Coovadia, as part of his work. In summary, they had created a physical world in which the tools of their trade were more than simply efficient and easy to work with. They were symbolic of particular aspects of the writing process and of the worlds being created in their fiction.

There is also a sense of ritual to the patterning of the working day that each author subscribes to, whether it involves working for a particular time period in the morning (Coovadia) or afternoon (Van de Ruit), or a fairly standard working day (Orford and Beake), measured with various markers such as number of words (all authors) or chapters and days of the week in a diary to complete (Beake and Van de Ruit). The

working day is interspersed with fairly frequent breaks that are often involved in the generation of ideas, or revision, rather than simply being rest periods.

Translation took place either first in the form of handwritten notes while ideas were being generated and organized, which were later either retyped onto computer (as in Orford's case) or simply kept in case they were needed for future reference after capturing initial ideas (as in Beake's case) or it took place directly onto the authors' computers (as in Beake, Coovadia and Van de Ruit's instances). While Orford saw generating ideas directly on a computer as overly mechanistic and likely to generate ideas from the intellect rather than the emotional truth she seeks, this sentiment was not shared by the other authors. All except for Coovadia transcribed organizational diagrams on paper at various points in the writing process.

While there is a danger of taking these findings and deciding that a well appointed study with lovely views and a state of the art laptop will lead to excellent writing, what is suggested here is not a simple causal relationship. The presence of physical *discomfort* or an ascetic environment could even help some writers, if this were part of how they saw writers they admire working. The suggestion is simply that these factors do play a role as expressions of a particular individual's personality that allows them to enter into a particular state of mind for creative writing, and because of the practical considerations mentioned above.

### 7.2.4 Other influences on the writing process: personal relationships and the domain and field as situational variables

In addition to the impact of the physical environment and equipment authors use while writing, other situational variables could be added to the Flower and Hayes model of the writing process. Affective considerations such as relationships with family, friends and work colleagues, as Berkenkotter and Murray and Csikszentmihalyi suggested, undoubtedly have an impact on the writing process. While interesting and even traumatic life experiences or adventures are probably enriching in terms of goal and problem setting in long term memory, a successful creative writing process over the long term itself often requires calm, freedom from distractions, and emotional as well as material support. Significant relationships in an author's life can play a role in all of the above, either to the detriment or in support of the writing process.

Taking breaks emerged as a more complex part of the model that Csikszentmihalyi had explained, as they were not only related to the incubation of new ideas. Furthermore, the authors' responses to questions on their knowledge of and access to the domain and field supports Csikszentmihalyi's theory that there is more than individual talent to the creative writing process. There is much that can be learnt, developed and enhanced and much that can stand in the way of success (and therefore the possibility of carrying on a writing career) if coping skills within the field are not developed. While there are no simple formulae for success, there are common sets of challenges that need negotiating, all of which have their impact on the creative writing process.

#### 7.2.4.1 The nature and significance of taking breaks

The line of questioning around breaks could have been abandoned after the first interview with Orford[91] if it hadn't been for the importance attached to breaks as part of the creative process mentioned by all of the authors in Csikszentmihalyi's work and the presence of a beautiful turquoise chaise longue in Orford's writing studio. My mother, a professional fine artist, has always held that one can tell if a studio belongs to a 'real' artist if they have a bed in the studio, as naps are important to creative people. According to Csikszentmihalyi this could be because rest periods could assist in the creative process by linking one to the world of the subconscious more easily than when in a fully wakened state. Rather than napping as straightforward resting, it is more like a kind of meditation that leads to new connections between ideas, ideas that help solve a problem in the creative process, or the kind of 'eureka' epiphanies that people imagine come from nowhere, but are really probably a coming together of a lot of thinking over time.

While the authors expressed different levels of awareness of the significance of taking breaks, they all took them in some form, either by returning to other, less creative writing or non writing work (as with Beake and Coovadia) or through taking exercise such as walking or gym (Beake and Orford) or with a drink to unwind either during or at the end of a day's work.

Orford and Van de Ruit describe needing the occasional longer break of a week or more to go somewhere away from their routine writing space to write or revise, and Beake's research 'field' trips build this into her writing process. While it did not come up in the interview, Coovadia frequently emailed me from overseas visits he makes as part of his academic job and he works daily in two places – his home and the university. Orford mentioned in a blog a 'post partum *tristesse'* (Orford, 2009a) after completing a book and takes a longer break with her family at this time. Van de Ruit describes feeling like a woman who has just given birth not wanting to get pregnant again immediately, therefore they also feel they need significant breaks between books. This could be a function of their writing series, where each book is in fact not part of a separate writing process. Perhaps being a writer of longer fiction necessitates some flexibility with regards to time and location, as Csikszentmihalyi hypothesized.

#### 7.2.4.2 Knowledge of domain (training and ability)

The enriching influence of other careers and experiences in the domain of the word on the creative writing process was clearly evident with all of the authors, from Coovadia's literature studies and teaching to Orford and Beake's journalism careers, Orford's skills learnt from cameramen while filming documentaries, and Van de Ruit's acting career. Thus the proverbial 'University of Life' is explicitly credited by all of them with more than school or actual university when it comes to writing skills, even in the case of Coovadia who benefited from American Ivy League creative writing courses as both a student and tutor.

[91] Cf. Chapter Three.

As mentioned previously, it is possible that much of what was learnt in formal education (such as basic writing, spelling and grammar skills) became automated to the point that the authors would not consciously recognise these influences. Families of origin were credited with encouraging reading and writing as activities as well as independent thinking. All of the authors had access to tertiary education (which involves substantial amounts of reading and writing, and in some cases interaction with mentors who were already successful fiction writers or playwrights) and came from educated families with access to books and travel that would have helped develop their knowledge of the domain of the word.

Van de Ruit's assertion that writers should demonstrate less 'ego' and allow more people into the writing process (as he does) could stem from a personal life philosophy[92] be to do with his training in another branch of the domain of the word, namely drama where he worked in collaboration with another actor and where his material was always tested against an audience. Perhaps he needs this audience feedback, even if it is limited to one or two trusted people. Coovadia was the author who reported both the most difficulty finding a publisher for his first book and then having a book he described everyone 'hating' and he had the most difficulty accepting feedback from editors. In other words, each author may have a particular combination of temperament or personality types and formative experiences that form part of their knowledge of a domain and experiences within a field, and this could be worth much closer study by a researcher with a background in psychology.

#### 7.2.4.3 Knowledge of and access to field (publishing)

While it is clearly true that creativity does not simply rest in the individual, and there is sometimes significant outside input in the creation of something so complex as a novel, most of the creative work in a project such as this is could be done alone and this, as Beake and Orford point out, requires immense stamina quite possibly sustained by a belief in one's own personal talent and ability or identity as a writer or creative person which could prove to be psychologically important to the individual writer.

There is evidence of a certain naivety among the authors about the publishing industry for the publication of the first fiction book, which gradually evolved into confident interactions with familiar publishers and agents for subsequent books. All of the authors expressed some confidence that they had reached a stage where they would be more or less guaranteed of a publisher accepting their work in South Africa, if not abroad. However, negotiating with publishers or agents and learning to manage pressures of deadlines and other matters had been practiced in other spheres such as journalism or drama (and arguably during university studies) prior to novel writing.

While all of the authors in this study had, by virtue of the selection criteria described in Chapter One, received some acclaim for their work, this came from the field in various forms and required some management by the author. Success in the field of

[92] He mentioned on his 2009 blog on the Penguin website (About John, 2010) that he was influenced by Eckhart Tolle and his book *The power of now* (2005) which deals with living in the present and learning to avoid falling into the traps of the ego, which Tolle defines as a concern with social status and material gain.

publishing was clearly an advantage if it brought financial freedom to concentrate on working on creative writing alone. Beake and Van de Ruit have in common that neither humorous nor children's literature are taken very seriously, no mater how popular they might be. In Beake's case there are specific awards for young adult and children's literature, but the income from her writing can be limited at times and she has to take on trade writing in order to finance her independent writing. In Van de Ruit's case, the literary awards to match his books' enormous popular appeal have not been forthcoming. He has thus been accepted by the field in terms of publishers', booksellers', school teachers' and book buyers' enthusiasm, but not yet by the field of literary criticism situated in literary prizes and university English departments. Given that his success in the one area of the field has brought financial freedom and has drawn praise for his work from one of the world's top comedian's, Monty Python's John Cleese[93], it is perhaps up to any author to decide what feedback from the field they personally care about and wish to take note of, and what they wish to ignore as unimportant to them. In Beake's case being ignored by some parts of the dominant field was an advantage – under Apartheid her children's books, expressing her goals for content that emphasized racial tolerance and social justice, slipped through the censor's net without the consequences many writers of adult material faced of incurring a ban and possibly interrogation or even incarceration of the author (as happened to Orford). It could affect writer's processes in a number of ways, as an influence on style and content goals as an author chooses to rebel against or emulate other prominent writers already accepted in the field.

Furthermore, success in the field has an impact on the writing process in terms of securing the financial freedom to concentrate on creative writing projects alone. Orford and Van de Ruit were able to decide to give up nearly all other work in favour of creative writing once their creative writing generated enough income, while Beake supplements her income with magazine and trade writing and Coovadia works at a university. Income is not the only consideration, however, as Coovadia's work brings him stimulation he feels he would not like to be without, and work in related areas of the field such as university literature departments or with educational publishers can also provide valuable networking opportunities with critics, competition judges and people who might publish future work.

When it comes to where the writing process is located, it is no co-incidence that at this established stage in their writing careers, all four authors in this study live and work in Cape Town, one of South Africa's two major publishing 'capitals', regardless of where their writing careers began. Csikszentmihalyi pointed out that creative people in all domains tend to conglomerate wherever there is the most opportunity and activity in their field. This further enhances their ability to network within the field and probably means they can meet easily with publishers, attend book fairs and so forth without the disruption to their work that travel from another South African town or city would necessitate.

#### 7.2.4.4 Personal relationships as situational variables

All of the authors touched on the idea of the writer as a detached observer. Orford advises this, Beake says it is necessary but difficult, Van de Ruit mentions how his

[93] Who agreed to act as The Guv in the November 2010 release film of *Spud.*

narrator, Spud, is an observer and calls himself an observer of masculine behaviour and one of Coovadia's narrators mentions this trait. This places certain cognitive demands on the writer and also sets some potential parameters for personal relationships.

There was an indication that social variables were very important to the creative writing processes of all four writers. Close relationships are helpful in supporting an otherwise potentially lonely existence of a writer who has to work for long stretches with no colleagues or other human contact, but also had to place not too many demands on the writer's time. Families, friends or romantic partners were described as ideal for these successful authors if they enabled the creative writing process, offering encouragement and helping to keep distractions at bay. As was pointed out previously, the creative writing process can be tremendously draining, and requires plenty of uninterrupted time for all its subprocesses, including breaks. Relationships with romantic partners, spouses, extended family and friends, even children (in Orford's case) can have a positive impact on the writing process, if the author manages this in some way. A husband who is accepting of his wife's frequent extended absences and need for solitude to the detriment of the housework and who is willing to take care of the children during these periods is critical to Orford's success, as is the hired help to take care of the children's needs when Orford needs emotional relief thanks to her intense involvement in crime that affects children. Being the mother of three daughters is also an inspiration to her to solve the puzzle of crime against women for her own peace of mind. Van de Ruit's girlfriend takes care of some of the tasks that would distract him from his work, such as his tax returns and publicity and is his travelling companion on his longer breaks overseas. Some stability in terms of personal relationships, might, as Csikszentmihalyi suggested, free up energy and time that could otherwise be spent on emotional dramas as well as providing emotional happiness through rewarding companionship. The two authors who lived with family or a romantic partner supported this argument. However, it is easy to imagine relationships that could be equally *detrimental* to the writing process.

In Csikzentmihalyi's research this was pointed out, in particular by many of the successful creative women he interviewed, that they could have had more support from their spouses. Sometimes a choice is even made *between* a writing career and family life. Beake and Van de Ruit (to date) have consciously decided against having children themselves as this would interfere with their freedom of movement and their free time to write. Coovadia mentioned having to work to keep his romantic and social life at arms' length for the same reason, and deliberately or not, has not had children to date. Even Orford has spent money to 'hire a wife'[94] from time to time to replace her in her duties, and mentions how writing fiction with children under four was not really possible for her due to the intense need for maternal involvement at this stage in children's development. While she has successfully combined motherhood of three children and a writing career, she did decide not to have a fourth child because it would hamper her writing process and she has had to make a strong stand on not feeling 'mother's guilt' about her work habits. In an article in *O Magazine* (Orford, 2010: 112) in which she was asked for advice for aspiring novelists, she recommended getting a good therapist as essential for coping with the conflicting

[94] Cf. Chapter Three, where she uses this expression for hiring an au pair.

demands of a writing career and family life as she felt she had struggled to achieve a balance in this at first.

More direct involvement or support from particular family or friends appeared to have a positive impact on some of the writer's processes. Coovadia's father offered valued advice on style for his first book, Orford's husband designed her ideal writing studio, Beake's friends help with her research (and are often befriended at first through this research) and Van de Ruit's girlfriend is involved in reviewing and brainstorming each day's writing. While Van de Ruit put his unusual level of involvement of a 'significant other' in his writing process down to lack of ego, it is possible to put it down to personal temperament, age and other factors related to individual personality. There is undeniably an element of sacrificing some conventional aspects of family life for the writing processes' requirements, but it is debatable whether this is more striking for writers than for any other choice for a successful, intensely involving career, as Csikzentmihalyi's research across a wide range of domains showed.

### 7.3 Identity and the creative writer: juggling multiple roles (characterizing the self)

The writer is the progenitor of the book, and images of giving birth are common in creative writing courses, unsurprisingly especially those offered by women[95] but also used by Van de Ruit. However, as in the saying that 'the child is father of the man,' the book can become the part of the author that the world knows best. Van de Ruit expressed how most people who remember him at all after he is gone, will remember him as 'Spud' rather than himself, and even his mother gets confused between what actually happened to her son and family and fictional events in his books. He further has to juggle his celebrity identity or persona with his private self. Orford had an interviewer meet her for the first time face to face and blurt out her disappointment: 'But you don't look like Clare at all' and she had to point out 'But I'm not Clare, I'm me.' A *Publisher's weekly* reviewer of Coovadia's *The wedding* put this inevitable link between authors and their main characters in a more sophisticated way: 'If the narrator bears any postmodern resemblance to Coovadia, then one happy result of Ismet and Kateja's [sic] marriage is this talented and promising young novelist'[96]. Beake seems to have this problem in reverse, sometimes being asked how she can write from the viewpoint of characters who are children, when she has no children of her own, or from the viewpoint of other genders or vastly different cultures like the San.

Clearly a writer has to occasionally ignore outsiders' perspectives and maintain his detachment if he is to write anything beyond personal memoirs. That said, characters are vehicles for particular viewpoints a writer wishes to express or issues she wishes to explore, as discussed under goal setting and generating, and, as writer Dorian

[95] Cf. Cameron (1995).

[96] Umuzi Press, 2009a.

Haarhoff points out in his writing workshops[97] from a Jungian perspective, it is possible that all characters in a work of fiction are manifestations of different aspects of the writer's personality.

The relationship between characters and their creators is symbiotic, and can be emotionally taxing, as the influence is not one-sided. Van de Ruit, like Dickens, was moved to tears by the killing off of his character, Gecko, to the point of going into a clinical depression afterwards, even though Gecko is entirely fictional. In order to create characters that allow readers a visceral sense of the perspective of another person, boundaries between characters and their creators are sometimes blurred as an author may have to write from a place inside themselves where they, for a limited time, see, hear, feel, taste, act and think of the world through the eyes, ears, skin, mouth, limbs and mind of the character they are currently writing into existence. Van de Ruit touches on the process involved in this with a term the fiction writing world could do well to examine and borrow from film and theatre: 'method' writing, where a necessary condition of writing authentic characters is to for a time seek out every aspect of your self that is able to completely identify with that character[98]. Atwood (2002: 57) attempts to explain this aspect of the writing process metaphorically with her 'best guess' using *Alice through the looking glass* (a book she says is 'always so useful in matters of the construction of alternate worlds')[99]:

> The act of writing takes place at the moment when Alice passes through the mirror. At this one instant, the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves, and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life, neither the one thing nor the other, though at the same time she is all of these at once. At that moment time itself stops, and also stretches out, and both writer and reader have all the time not in the world.

## 7. 4 Conclusion

The writer has a number of worlds to explore and reconcile with one another, as does the researcher of writing. Personal physical spaces that are the creation of writers overlap with the physical constraints of the publishing environment they find themselves in and inner worlds of experience, emotion and imagination. The inner world(s), both past and present, of an individual might find echoes in wider issues in the individual's society and in existing literature, which can be synthesized into unique writing goals for content and style. The researcher of creative writing, within the constraints of his own worlds, needs to occasionally map out some of these often unchartered territories in ways that can be meaningfully used by other explorers of the process of creative writing. If this is done across countries, genders and ethnic groups as well as across disciplines such as composition studies, creative writing studies,

[97] Which I attended in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

[98] This conclusion is supported in an article in *The Writer* in which fiction writer Diane Lefer (2000) makes specific recommendations on how Method acting techniques developed by Strasberg and Stanislavski could be 'pilfered' to suit the needs of writers.

[99] Interestingly, Imraan Coovadia makes a number of references to *Alice in Wonderland: Through the looking glass* as a metaphor for inconsistencies and enigmas in characters in *High, low, in-between* (2009: 185, for example).

pedagogy and psychology, it is possible to build an ever more detailed picture of how creative writing processes work that could be of enormous benefit to both teachers and students of this process. In South Africa the creative writing process is often seen as a mystery in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and which therefore cannot be meaningfully analyzed. However, abroad and increasingly in South Africa, there is a move to examine this mystery, however sacred, not to deconstruct and demystify it but rather to seek a better understanding of a phenomenon that is a large part of what an increasingly literate world engages with – writing as a process as well as a product. If a reader's world can be shaped by the worlds present in a text, then it is important to investigate how this world is created at source by writers.

When it comes to the Flower and Hayes model, this appears to be an excellent starting point for understanding a complex cognitive process. However, there are some aspects discussed above that need reviewing in the light of this research and research by Csikszentmihalyi and Berkenkotter and Murray. Firstly, the 'monitor' remains a problematic category. It seems the monitor could be a function of the Flower and Hayes 'long term memory' (components that Csikszentmihalyi would call the knowledge of the domain). In other words, it could be the brain's way of using knowledge of everything from sentence types to process knowledge (such as 'now I need a break') to make decisions about what to do at any given time. However, these decisions are accounted for through the processes of goal setting, reviewing, and so on in a way that makes the monitor as a separate entity not fit into the model comfortably. As a distinct cognitive process in itself there does not appear to be much evidence for it and it is not clear how one would prove it is a separate entity at all. The problematic naming of the monitor as a quasi-personification, as pointed out in Chapter Two, indicates that Flower and Hayes also found it difficult to conceive clearly. The idea of process goals under goal setting could adequately account for the decision making processes that cause a shift from revising to organizing, for example, without the need for this rather uncomfortable element.

Murray's observation that Berkenkotter ignored his 'bathroom epiphanies' is worth considering as a gap in the Flower and Hayes model also. Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges the importance of breaks to the creative process, but his assertion that breaks are mostly important to the incubation of creative ideas may need expanding in the light of this study. Breaks were used by the four authors for a variety of functions and not only for incubation of ideas. Some breaks were taken to allow time for the free-flow of subconscious ideas (as part of the generation process), but at other times breaks allowed for rest needed *after* intense periods of the writing process, and at other times for subconscious or intuitive *evaluation* of the writing in progress that would lead to more conscious problem solving, goal setting and further generation strategies. Some breaks are spontaneous, taken at random when the need is felt for them, while others have a pattern or ritual to them and can be planned in advance. In all cases, there is room for further research into the different ways breaks were used. In this study, all four authors provided some acknowledgement of the often mysterious subconscious processes that occur during breaks, which everyone experiences, even if their role is only half understood.

The writer's long-term memory and many aspects of the task environment and other 'outside' influences on the writing process could be better accounted for with

different subcategories, such as where the different processes might take place, as Csikszentmihalyi suggested in his two places and times 'model' (one ordered and routine, one involving a change of scene and break in routine). Once again, this additional model needs nuancing, as he had surmised that the routine environment was best for routine work, while the change of scene was best for generation and creativity, but this implies a return to a more linear characterization of the creative process (split into the creative phase and then a less creative revision phase) that was not borne out by this study and which contradicts his own assertion that the creative process is recursive. Once again, it is clear that different authors might employ different strategies in ways that suit their own unique writing process needs. While Van de Ruit may to a certain extent follow Csikszentmihalyi's model of breaks in the sense that he travels to exotic locations in between books and allows ideas to free-flow there, he also uses these books to escape from the demands of a celebrity existence, and his routine, daily breaks and visits to his old familiar school are equally important to generating fresh material for his work. Orford seems to use her bigger breaks to unfamiliar surroundings more for revision work to gain some perspective on her completed drafts, than necessarily for incubation or generation of new ideas. Much of her incubation and generation is in fact conducted in her routine environment. Beake's trips to exotic locations appear to fall under the category of research field trips but may also allow for incubation of ideas and evaluations of the effectiveness of text already produced. Furthermore, there was strong support for Flower and Hayes' assertion that revision is more than simply a mechanical process carried out at the end of more creative writing phases. Rather it is entailed in every dimension of the recursive writing process as a creative, conceptual sub-process.

In conclusion, all of the authors appeared to implement only processes that are helpful and learnt to avoid what is antithetical. They use and or reject particular strategies depending on their proclivities and this self knowledge drives the setting of writing process goals that lead to the generation of ideas as well as revision techniques, the desire to collaborate with others while writing, and so on. As in the case of the physical environment, translation tools and social variables, authors focus some of their writing time on an awareness of the writing process itself and set writing process goals that improve their process as they develop experience. In other words a more haphazard or what all the authors described as 'organic' or exploratory approach might become more 'honed' (Van de Ruit) or 'professional' (Beake) over time as solutions to problems posed by the writing process or situational variables and impinging aspects of the field, not simply the emerging text (as in the Flower and Hayes model), emerge.

A comment my supervisor often made in the margins at the start of this research, was along the lines of 'do you mean actually *writing*?' and this question needs addressing as an important conclusion that emerged from this study of creative writing. One cannot confuse or equate the physical act of writing – putting pen to paper or filling a computer screen with words– with the entire writing process. It is impossible to separate out diagramming in order to plot the course of the emerging text, or going for a walk in order to allow ideas to incubate, or taking notes while researching ballistics, from the writing process and it creates a false dichotomy to see these as a different process or separate stages from the part where these thoughts, insights or research are put down as words on paper. The mechanical process and the thought processes are inseparable – one cannot really happen without the other. Spontaneous insights might

crop up when a person mistypes a word, so ‘generation’ of ideas may happen as a result of translation. While the overall process might show a pattern, or even cycles of patterns on the surface, attempts to simplify the creative writing process into a linear, one-step-follows-the-next phase model are misguided. There is a progression from nothing on paper to a finished product, there are phases when others are allowed in or excluded, but this should not lead to the idea that any part of the process happens once and once only or in an entirely predictable sequence. Writing is a medium of expression chosen for individual reasons. There is more to the process than simply the production of what the reader eventually sees on a page. In summary, the complexity and recursiveness of the creative writing process described by Flower and Hayes, Berkenkotter and Murray, Csikszentmihalyi and others is largely upheld by this study, while aspects of these theories have been challenged as potentially under-researched or in need of further nuancing or re-thinking. Finally, this research has engaged with the theories of writing as a cognitive process within the South African context, showing that while most of the influences on the writing process might be universal, there are both local and personal, as well as possibly gender, generational and culturally related factors that could be further explored.

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# Addenda

# Addendum A
# Ethical clearance

UNIVERSITEIT·STELLENBOSCH·UNIVERSITY
jou kennisvennoot • your knowledge partner

3 June 2009

Tel.: 021 - 808-2687
Enquiries: Sidney Engelbrecht
Email: sidney@sun.ac.za

Reference No. 156/2009

Ms M MacRobert
Department of English
University of Stellenbosch
**STELLENBOSCH**
7602

Dear Ms M MacRobert

**APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL CLEARANCE**

With regards to your application, I would like to inform you that the project, *How creative writers write: Interviews with successful publishing writers*, has been approved on condition that:

1. The researcher/s remain within the procedures and protocols indicated in the proposal;
2. The researcher/s stay within the boundaries of applicable national legislation, institutional guidelines, and applicable standards of scientific rigor that are followed within this field of study and that
3. Any substantive changes to this research project should be brought to the attention of the Ethics Committee with a view to obtain ethical clearance for it.

We wish you success with your research activities.

Best regards

MS. M. HUNTER-HÜSSELMANN
Co-ordinator: Research (Human and Social Sciences)

# Addendum B
# Informed consent form given to participants

**STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY**
**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

How creative writers write: interviews with successful publishing writers.

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Marguerite MacRobert (BA Honours (English), from the Department of Curriculum Studies at Stellenbosch University, as part of her Masters Degree thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a successful published and publishing writer working in South Africa.

## 1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to perform an investigation of the writing processes of successful publishing authors in the South African context, with an eye on possible implications for how novice creative writers are trained. Four authors will be interviewed using interview schedules based on a literature review of research on writing. The intention is to garner current, South African insights into the creative writing process in order to nuance this field of knowledge and to challenge reductive, undynamic ways of thinking about it. The research will also briefly explore pedagogical implications as a signal to further research.

## 2. PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- **Participate in an interview with open-ended questions.** This will be conducted at a location, date and time that is convenient to you, by arrangement. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. The interview should take between two and three hours.
- **Answer further clarification questions on the transcript** after the interview either via email or, if necessary, a second (shorter) interview.

## 3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There may be some inconvenience caused to you in terms of getting to a venue to meet with the researcher.

## 4. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND TO SOCIETY

- Contribution to new theories of creative writing being developed internationally.
- Clarification on writing process in South Africa will potentially help with the training of writers in schools and at universities.

- Potential publicity for the author and their work through publication of research articles in South Africa and abroad, as well as extra information available on the author and their work for schools and universities which prescribe or refer to their work (where applicable).

## 5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Unfortunately, no payment is offered for your participation, due to limited funding.

## 6. CONFIDENTIALITY

This is not a confidential study and the information gathered may be used in educational situations (for example, as a part of lecture notes) or as a part of research papers, with your name included. You have the right to review any use of the material and to comment on, edit or withdraw permission for the use of your recorded words.

Recordings and transcriptions of interview(s) and notes, as well as a copy of the final thesis and any research articles using your name will be made available to you, if you so wish.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Recordings will remain the intellectual property of the University of Stellenbosch. Transcripts will be stored as password protected files on my personal computer and office computer. Recordings will be kept in my office, which is locked.

## 7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. By participating in this study, you agree to be mentioned by your name in my research. You may refuse to answer any questions you don't wish to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## 8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact my supervisor, Dr Shaun Viljoen Viljoen, via email on scv@sun.ac.za or on 082 789 0439. Dr Viljoen's work address is room 580, Arts Faculty; Humanities Building; Ryneveld Street, Stellenbosch, 7602.

## 9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims or rights because of your participation in

this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms Maryke Hunter-Husselmann at the Stellenbosch Unit for Research Development, on (021) 808 4623.

**SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

The information above was described to me by Marguerite MacRobert in English and I am in command of this language. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

**Name of Participant**

_____ _____

**Signature of Participant** **Date**

I **would / would not** (delete whichever is not applicable) like a copy of the thesis and any articles leading from this interview to be made available to me.

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to _____ [*name of the subject/participant]. [H*e/she] was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in English and no translator was used.

_____ _____

***Signature of Investigator*** ***Date***

# Addendum C

## Sample semi-structured interview schedule (Margie Orford)

**Note:** The basic structure of the interview was the same for all four authors. References to research on the author and his or her works were used as prompts for each author. Where a question was already answered the interviewer would leave it out, and at times fresh leads were followed, as discussed in Chapter One, so the schedule acted as a guide rather than as a rigid, formal structure for the interview.

**Process in broad strokes. Author's personal conception**

Before I ask lots of more specific questions about various bits of the writing process, I'd like you hear your perception of how the writing process works for you. Could you try to briefly summarize your writing process from start to finish?

How has your writing process changed from the time you wrote your first novel to now?

A lot of the detailed academic studies on the writing process have been conducted in the field of academic rather than creative writing. You have written across a wide range of fields – children's writing, journalism, academic writing and writing for the screen as well as writing your novels and some poetry. Are there any important similarities and differences in your writing process between the creative writing and the documentary/academic writing?

**Planning**

GOAL SETTING

What motivates you to start writing a new book? [*possible prompts*: *A deadline? Money? Something you want to say?]*

Has your motivation been different for different books?

Do you start off with a particular audience in mind or do you decide on style and content that please yourself? [*Your publisher?*]

GENERATING IDEAS

What gets the creative ideas flowing?

What do you find the most challenging – the original idea, the overall plot or filling in the details?

I've read quite a bit about the influence of various documentaries on your fictional work – you shot a documentary on the fishing industry in Windhoek and you wrote a piece on the sex industry and trafficking women for *Marie Claire* – these clearly form a basis for *Blood rose* and

*Like clockwork*. While you were filming or writing the non fiction, did you already start picturing a novel then, or did you decide to write detective thrillers and then dredge through your memory bank and your scrap books for material?

Obviously after the book has been published, everyone starts drawing comparisons between you and your hero Clare Hart. But does using autobiographical material ever pose problems for you while you are actually writing? [*do you need to cover your trail a bit?]*

You mentioned in an interview I read that your writing of relationships was influenced by or modelled on Milan Kundera – could you elaborate on this?

You mentioned in an interview and it comes across in your poem about your writing of daddy's girl that you aim for a concise, clear, popular writing style, would you like to talk a bit about your goals when it comes to writing style?

Your books have sold widely in many countries. How do you picture your audience?

Is your sense of an audience clearer now than it was the first time you wrote a novel? [Do fan-mail, replies to your blogs and so forth influence your writing process?]

How does this influence you when you write?

When does this influence you as you write? [*All the time or only when you consider writing style?]*

Your chosen genre of detective thriller has its conventions – how does this influence your writing process. [*Do you ever feel like you have a form to fill in/ pattern to cut out?]*

It comes across quite clearly in your books that you are a woman with a message and a mission, not only to entertain and titillate. Would you like to talk about how you decide what you would like to write about and how you manage to integrate this with your other goals of entertaining and keeping the genre exciting and so forth.

ORGANISING

PLANNING BEFORE WRITING

How much planning do you do before you start writing? [For how long?]

What form does this planning take – [do you diagram? Story board? Notebook? Collage? What works for you?]

Do you work with anyone else while planning or is this a solo activity?

Do you do any reading while planning? [What kind? How much? What influence does this have on your planning?]

Do you plan mostly for a broad plot outline, for characterization or any other specifics? How do you go about this?

Has your planning technique changed as you have become more experienced? For example, do you now plan less or more before you start writing?

If you've changed planning tools -what is the most effective planning tool you use?

Does some of your planning involve any brainstorming or "right-brain activities" like writing with your non dominant hand, etc. of the sort used in popular creativity courses and in books on writing?

PLANNING WHILE WRITING

While you are writing, do you find you stick to your original plan or do you keep revisiting it?

Does this happen automatically as part of the flow of writing or do you need to stop for a while and take stock and revise original plans (like going back to the drawing board)? Is it a conscious process or something that you do semi automatically?

You're writing a series with a main character who presumably has to stay fairly consistent over the different books – but does Clare ever surprise you? Do you keep a list of her habits next to your desk and force her to stick to whisky and not order a girly cocktail EVER?

Do other characters tend to take on a life of their own and the plot meanders accordingly or do you tend to find they are more or less as you first envisaged?

One children's writer said she was writing a story and a group of elves showed up and she said ' sorry, there are no elves in this story' and they said 'but we're here now' – has something like this ever happened to you? (I'd love to read a Clare Hart with elves, by the way!)

How do you plan the in-depth research that goes into your books? Do you decide as you're writing 'I'm no good at writing about shooting, I've never fired a gun in my life' and then head off to learn, or do you plan before you start writing to go for shooting lessons?

One interviewer said it was the research behind your stories that gave them the hallmark of quality writing, but there must be more to it – some writers could research like mad and still not write well. Apart from giving you a technical vocabulary and an understanding of processes like body decay, how does the research you do help you to write well?

You seemed in your poem on Daddy's Girl to be searching for the words to describe the invisible sound of black hair falling on a child's plump cheek - Is a love of language important to get you going? Do you play around with word-play and free associations or a phrase or quote?

**Translating**

Daddy's girl poem on your blog mentions pen on paper, but you also mention on your home page that your most treasured possession is your laptop – what do you write on first? When do you go from paper to laptop?

Why a laptop and not a desktop?

Where do you prefer to write and why?

When you're out on your shooting lessons and so forth, how do you capture the experience so you can refer to it later?

Once you are really into the writing process, do you mostly write by hand or do you type? Why is this?

If not already answered – and depending on answer to last question,

HANDWRITING: do you write particularly fast? Can you read your own handwriting afterwards? Who retypes this work? Do you ever dictate? What size paper is most comfortable?

Notebooks? Pen or pencil? Colour? Why?

TYPING

Software? Do you type well or fast? (is this important to your writing process?)

BOTH

How would you describe your spelling ability? (if poor) does this slow you down?

Your grammar? (as above)

Do you first write short notes to flesh out later or do you just get stuck into writing the detail? Do you ever sketch/collage instead of writing?

**Revising and reviewing**

So you've started getting work onto computer or on paper –

How do you organize this material? According to your original plan? How often do you stop to see where everything is going – how you do you get a sense that you are "on track" and everything is going well?

Do you write a book from beginning to end or do you tend to jump between scenes, phrases and moments, and then arrange them all later?

Do you spend most of your time writing, organizing what you have written and linking it together or checking your work for spelling or other mistakes?

What do you do if everything is going badly and you just aren't expressing yourself well?

What bothers you most – poor sentence structure, poor word choice or poor spelling? Why?

What do you tend to actually fix first?

Do you work in terms of drafts? I.e. first completed draft, revised draft, final draft? How many?

What are the characteristics of each drafting process? Just how rough is the first/rough draft?

How polished is your final draft?

If you have had a bad day and a lot of words on paper that just aren't working for you, do you throw it all in the bin and start afresh or do you rework what you've got?

Do you take a break first?

You mentioned in a short piece on financing fiction in Oprah magazine that you wrote your first novel in 12 hour a day sessions. Do you need breaks when you write? How often do you take a break? Why do you take breaks? What signals the end of a break?

Do you check for and correct spelling and other mistakes as you go along, after you've written a chunk of writing, at the end of a complete book or poem, or not at all ('that's an editor's job')?

When you correct language, spelling and punctuation errors, why do you do it? [*For your own peace of mind? For the audience? To please the publisher?*]

**During the overall writing process:**

When and how do considerations of audience influence what you do?

When and how do other people such as publishers/editors influence what you write and how you write it?

Where do you get help when you need it? People? Books?

What do you do when/if the dreaded writer's block strikes?

Who is/are the first reader(s) of your writing?

At what stages of your writing process do you need to work alone? When do you find outside input useful?

You blog while you write – why? Does this help your writing process at all?

Mastered skills

What is the most significant skill you feel you have as a writer that gives your writing its edge?

Are there any particular skills you feel you have automated over the years? [explanation and e.g. if needed: *If a writer is going to write skillfully and at a reasonable pace, some skills have to be automated. For example, when working on my poetry with a more experienced poet, he had the dictum that a metaphor was better than a simile and told me to 'commit myself to the image. I found this a really useful skill and it has gradually become automatic for me – whenever I am about to write 'it was like x' I automatically find my way around that 'like'* ]

Who helped you attain this skill? Was it your own conclusion drawn from reading, a teacher, an editor or publisher you've worked with?

SOCIAL VARIABLES

You have a family and quipped once that the reason you can't match Alexander McCall Smith's daily output is because he has a wife. You also mentioned on your home page that you are a pain and neglect your family. What specific influence does family life have on your writing process?

KNOWLEDGE OF DOMAIN

You have a background in film, journalism and English literature, as well as text-book writing.

Could you talk about their influences on your writing process? [IF NOT ANSWERED ALREADY]

You mention in interviews and on your blog what the influence of reading has been on your writing, but you don't really mention any training in writing as having an influence. Are you entirely self taught? Do you go for workshops? Did school help at all? [IF NOT ANSWERED ALREADY]

ACCESS TO FIELD

Arguably an important part of succeeding in a field like creative writing and publishing your work is your access to the field, networking with the right people and so forth – would you like to talk about this?

**Advice to school learners and teachers**

What advice would you give young aspiring writers who are still in school?

What advice would you give language teachers teaching the writing process?

# Addendum D

# Transcription of the interview with Margie Orford

**Date:** 23 March 2009

**Place:** Margie Orford's home, Cape Town.

**Duration of interview: 1: 57**

**Key:**

MO : Margie Orford

MM: Marguerite MacRobert

Where it was felt that the sense of the discussion would not be lost, the transcript has occasionally been edited to make sentences clearer. The unedited original interview recording can be accessed via the library of the University of Stellenbosch.

[omitted: Initial conversation about signing the consent form]

MM: What I'm looking at is the writing process; there are all sorts of details I'm going to be angling for. But before I begin with all my little detailed questions, if you were to sketch out your process – you've just finished writing a book - so what you can remember from start to finish more or less. Just in summary how your writing process works.

MO: I have quite a methodical writing process. My very first book published in 1996 was a children's book. Basically all of them have worked the same. I don't know how [many] – I suppose 15 books. Fiction, non-fiction, children's books - the method is the same. I'm given an idea - just a kernel of something and it usually revolves around an emotional interaction between two people. A kind of an emotional or ethical problem or interaction between two people. Then that will just kind of lodge in my mind and then I start making some notes and because I write so much I'm always working. Like I've just finished one book, but the second book is already quite far down its conceptual development, so I just let that develop for a while. Write notes, do free writing, just let it build, until I get to the point where I feel it's kind of ready to start going. So I have my little notebooks with me all the time and I write things in them like chapters, scenes and it kind of circles out from that particular idea.

This book I've written now, if we use that one as an example, it's called *Daddy's girl* and its about the abduction of a little girl and her father's reaction and hunt for her. What interested me in particular was the relationship between fathers and daughters and how, specifically in South Africa, that *benign* patriarchal connection has been broken, in my view, in our society. So you've had a severance of what fathers should do symbolically and in practice and so I was looking as what happens when a father who loves his daughter loses her in a society in which fathers no longer protect little girls - men no longer protect little girls. So that was the kernel. The story is easy: she's abducted and then they hunt for her and they find her and she'll either be dead or alive so the structure is really simple and you have to build that in-between.

So the process of writing. I let myself write - I try to keep the writing process completely separate from the editing process – my own internal editor – so I just write as things kind of come to me. So if you

imagine an archipelago of islands. In the beginning you'll just have a little atoll, little atoll, little atoll and there'll be dramatic moments or emotional moments which are key in the text and then as I write I kind of write from one atoll to the next and sometimes I feel a bit like those South Sea explorers, the Maoris, just going off and not knowing if there's another island that they're going to get to.

MM – You could hit the Pacific!

MO: Ja, ja, absolutely. And then you've had it. Um, then, slowly, I kind of backtrack back and forth, back and forth to kind of build the connections, build the narrative. So that initial question that I ask has to be very strong. I've had other questions but they can't sustain a whole year of concentrating, if you know what I mean. So then that needs to be strong and then, the genre that I write in – the kind of pace and the plot and the story of it - whatever. So then you start structuring around time, how long it will take. That I think about a lot, the timing of things, and then the sort of emotional connections between people. So its almost as if you've got this island thing going on and then you build a web so that they're connected and your reader will be able to pass from one island to the next and be kind of shepherded along. Also what I always do is write the end first, the very first thing I write is the end of the book. Perhaps because some of the subject matter I write about is so violent and so bleak that I need to know that I'm writing toward a point of connection again at the end. So I often write that so I know where I'm going, I know how it will resolve emotionally.

MM: Like reading a children's story, you know in the end the good guy will win so you actually write . . . . -

MO: Yes. Some of them might live and a few of them will live happily after ever after. If you know what I mean, so that's where I go to.

MM: So you actually make sure you don't end in the Pacific - you make sure you have your last -
MO: Yeah, I have my last island mapped out. It also gives attention to a book. You have to get to that point, if you know what I mean.

MM: Yes

MO: So I haven't worked out where all the bullets come from and who does what - I haven't worked all of that out when I start but I have worked out that feeling of… not a *happy* ending, but a point like a hopeful ending – there's some light.

MM: Perhaps closure?

MO: Closure. And I mean the easiest is if you have people in bed together in the end 'cause sex is always a fantastic counterpart.

MM: yes

MO: a counterpoint to murder.

MM: Well you've got that romance going on all time, so –

MO: Yes, I'm actually really writing a love story

MM: Yes and yet that never quite resolves but the two of them usually make it to the end.

MO: They always make it to their . . . . I've got seven books planned in this series so its like two people work now on how they can live together.

MM: Ah that's a very long story . . . . Well, you've answered a few of my questions but I'm going to ask some of them again anyway in more detail. Even just talking to you outside a few details came out that didn't come out now so if you don't mind – hope it doesn't annoy you – and that is a lot of very useful information right there. A lot of the details I've been looking at have been based on university professors worrying about how to make students write better academically so there isn't all that much that's been done academically on how creative writing works. You say your writing process is the same for all of tour books. Are there any differences?

MO: For fiction and non-fiction

MM: For fiction and for non-fiction. You've written widely across both

MO :Ja

MM: So you must have an idea for yourself.

MO: You know the problem with most academic writing and sadly the problem with most professors is that their writing is incredibly imprecise and it's written dreadfully, it's written in a way that removes the spirit of the person writing out of what they say. I've written academically myself so I'm not just doing a kind of hatchet job

MM: No, you've lectured as well

MO: Ja, and taught a lot and I've written academic books and all sorts of things. And one of the appalling things about much academic writing – and it's written as if its official writing – and then there's no sense of a person with some kind of passion, that a living person thought this. It's as if some sort of jargon-machine spewed this thing out. And students in my experience try to mimic that sort of writing, if you know what I mean. So it's a problem. I think it's a big problem for me; I mean I'm working with my daughter now who's in second year. She often asks me to look at her stuff and what I do if I'm writing a formal thing, I mean obviously I know different registers, I move between them quite easily. And it *is* like learning a musical instrument. It's like learning how to play a concerto compared to playing a Bob Dylan song; you play what is needed. So I think where academic writing is the same as fiction writing is that at the beginning when you write your paper even if you are a first-year you have to formulate it as a question that will sustain your interest. And then, even if your interest is to pass your term paper, to be able to formulate in your mind precisely and clearly how you're going to tackle that. How to comprehend the stuff that you're reading, make it your own; own it somehow by absorbing it and thinking it through and then writing precisely and clearly: subject, verb, object, full stop.

MM: And then with your creative writing, how does that work? How is that different and are you aiming for exactly the same thing?

MO: Well, with creative writing what you want is a precision of emotion so you don't want someone to be kind of annoyed or slightly pissed or really furious. You want to know are they irritated or are they in a murderous rage, or are they slightly annoyed, and then you find that precision and the more experience you get the more you calibrate the emotion that you describing.

[Phone ringing – Orford speaks to her daughter.]

MO: So for me where the two kinds of writing are the same (and I actually came to fiction from writing non fiction and through doing a lot of investigative stuff) is learning to understand people and learning to merge what people say and my knowledge of context together so you don't hear me showing off what I'd found out about gangs or whatever. A person would emerge who you could relate to.

MM: So make yourself a little less sort of visible.

MO: Um ja, make yourself less visible but actually learn to hear what people say which is the same as learning to read what other people write and then to filter it through your mind – distil it.

MM: I'm going move on to some other little details. You said when you start a book you start with that emotional ethical problem, which is what motivates you right in the beginning to write a book. Is it just fact or have you also got your deadlines and your other work? How do the two impact on each other? Does the publisher say, 'I want a book?

MO: Horrendously. [She put her head on the table – buries it in her arms here. Laughing but quite dramatic about the stress]

MM: Or do you . . . ?

MO: The last two books that I've written, the last two thrillers, have both been sold before writing. Before I started writing them they had been sold in three or four different places.

MM: Sorry, just to clarify: the concept of the book? You've done the story?
MO: Yes, the synopsis. What happened is that I did *Like clockwork* and then I got an agent in England and she sold *Like clockwork* plus *Blood ro*se plus this *Daddy's girl*, which I've just finished now, into various territories. So they were sold as a package with the other ones that I have outlined sort of as the scaffolding underneath. So it's been *unbelievable* writing to have to write a book that's better than a the last book and that's already sold and that I've been paid to write it's um – it's *terrible*! So you're paid – you know I've had advances – I've been able to write fulltime. It's very stressful. On the other hand I have always worked to deadline so I like having a deadline even though its sort of organises – its like writing the end, it's the same logic, I write the end its like the deadline, you know, its like the end of the book. Having a deadline sort of organises my mind and my time. When I've gone over deadline I usually can see two to three months before the hand-in-date and then I will say to them, 'I'm not going to be finished,' and then we just shuffle the date over. So its quite stressful but you know in a way its the same for a whole lot of writers – that's how you live off your writing. You know it's pre-sold and your advances allow you to, give you that time to write.

MM: But you came up with the ideas quite some time ago and before you're actually going to start writing.

MO: Yes ja ja ja those are all . . . .

MM: And so your motivation has been quite different for different books. *Like clockwork* - did you decide to write that just for yourself?

MO: Yes, I did decide to write it, I mean it was a gamble. It was a risk. I had a Fulbright scholarship and when I came back to South Africa in 2001 I decided then I wanted to make my living from writing. And so in the beginning 5% of my income was from writing and 95% was from other stuff. And slowly I shifted around. When I wrote *Like clockwork* I got a big royalty cheque from Maskew Miller-Longman and I took six months off. Instead of buying a new car or having a face lift I thought, I'm going to invest

in myself. I thought I'll invest in my own time, because writing is a business. So I did that and then *Like clockwork* sold and then quickly sold to Germany and France and Holland and all over the show. And that was my business plan- that was my gamble. I hoped that it would work and so far it has, since then.

MM: You've done very well.

MO: It's a very unromantic answer, but . . . .

MM: No well, I find the more I look into creative writing it's less romantic than we imagine – we've got a romantic idea about creative writing which sometimes gets in the way of people actually understanding how it works.

MO: Ja, you have to be sober and have few addiction problems and the more stable your home life is the better you can write.

MM: Good, you going to answer lots of my questions, which is wonderful! Once you've decided on your scene, your plotline, and so on how you get your creative ideas flowing from there? The original ideas are quite challenging, obviously, and you said that that's what usually starts you off. then you sketch out your plot. You said you work outwards from the details. Can you explain a little bit how that filling in the details works.

MO: How it works

MM: Physically

MO: OK. What's quite important for me is time. I have character, in a way, I have my two main characters – I've used them three times now – and I've got several more books in which I wheel out the poor creatures. So, with those I have two particular kinds of people that have a particular way of looking at the world and a particular ethical response to it. So that is a kind of drive. And you know for me plot is driven by character; the kind of person you are is going to determine how you react to certain events, which is the plot of life I suppose. And it should be the same in books. I mean I know there are thriller writers like Jeffrey D [Winston] for instance in which the plot is utterly formulated based on signs and stuff like that and you read it and you are completely gripped. The characters are flat. The way I write works differently, I think, or I try to make it differently. It's very much around how people are and how their histories have shaped them. So to get the sort of creative continuity – those little islands I was telling you about - in *Like clockwork* what I had was three dead girls. I had to find out about [those kids] so in that way that gives you a whole organisation around those particular people and who was linked to them and why they were there and that sort of stuff. So that was quite a simple – well I thought it would be simple – way of moving through time. So I'd given myself four weeks to fit that into. In *Blood rose* what I had was something that looked like a serial killing but was actually a cover-up of a political – you know – a political past.

MM: A big twist, yes

MO: So that was a different type of organise – it was like you had a time in the present that would kind of spiral down into future. . . .

MM: You said you were quite surprised by that development yourself. So where do the ideas come from?

MO: They just come

MM: They just come?

MO: Ja, I mean

MM: What are you doing when they come?

MO: I'll tell you what I do. I get up every day and I get my family out of the house and I go and sit at my desk and I work. So I work very methodically. I work from probably about eight, half-past eight and then I work all day till three or four. I sit down at my desk and I'll free-write, if I'm in the writing phase of it I just write. Sometimes I write, 'I don't know what to say and I don't know what to do'; its like this character is here and what are they doing? You kind of just metamorphose into that parallel space of writing, that writing space.

MM: Is it almost free-writing where you just write questions to yourself?

MO: Yes

MM: Until an answer comes?

MO: Yes, and then an answer comes and you, you it can be very exhausting, you know what I mean? It's very, very, very exhausting sometimes when you're in that creative phase. And often your best writing comes when you feel the worst. You can't tell when you read someone's writing whether it came easily or not.

MM: So you don't wait for inspiration to strike and . . . .

MO: No no no no no God!

MM: Do the vegetating or anything, you just sit and get going?

MO: I'll go to my room, and I sit and I often do (she's a famous American creative writing coach of course) with 'morning pages'

MM: Julia Cameron. Are you an *Artist's way* fan?

MO: No no no, I just know that little segment of that thing.

MM: That's interesting.

MO: So the morning pages, I find I just get all the top fluff off my brain out of my brain. I switch off my phone so I don't have any email connection, I don't have anything and then I just sit and I work. You know it's like being a builder. You arrive on site and there is, like, cement, a pile of brick, and there's no wall.

MM: And you've got your plan?

MO: And you have a plan- sort of a plan- and you kind of . . . .

MM: Sort of a plan, a rough sketch, yeah?

MO: Then you kind of build the wall and then you kind of go. And then I write it all up. The first draft I try to do just all the way through like that and then I type that out with all of my mad questions and everything. And you know once you have some kind of spine then I work around that more.

MM: I've read quite a bit about the influence of your documentaries on your fictional work. You did the fishing industry documentary in Windhoek. And you wrote a piece on the sex industry for *Marie Claire.* And these obviously form quite a solid basis in some way for *Blood rose* and *Like clockwork*. Did you start having your ideas for these books while you were doing them, 'cause they were quite a long time ago, I think?

MO: Yeah.

MM: The documentaries? '93 or thereabouts?

MO: I started some in '93 – a whole lot in Windhoek, I did some in the early 2000s as well.

MM: Did you start brewing and idea for to write fiction about them then, or was it a surprise to you later on that you went back to these things?

MO: I did films - the last films I did were in 2006, 2007 – so what you learn – what I learnt from film that I took over into my fiction writing was a particular way of seeing. Um because I worked a lot, I did a whole lot of stuff on the Kunene River on the Himba people which has nothing to do with the themes of what I write about. But I worked for a long time with a cameraman there who told stories in pictures – brilliant cameraman. And he knew how to tell a story in pictures. I knew how to tell a story in words which is maybe what academic writing is about, and I remember I was doing some directing and stuff with him and I had this epiphany where he showed me how you tell a picture - that when you tell a picture with film, with images and moving images, the emotional intensity of the story is completely different to the linearity of words. Of like, non-fiction words, if I can put it that way. There's a cerebralness to that – and I had this absolute insight that what counts in a film, what makes a film work, is the proximity between two people, the angle at which the camera is, so if it's close-up, if its mid-shot, if its pan-wide, if its pan-whatever; so when I write how that worked for me in fiction, apart from the content interest, was a certain way of locating the reader as though they were behind a camera. So I'm not writing for a script, but what it taught me is that when you're constructing a scene the proximity of your characters, the where you put the – how you locate – the narrative point of view is going to have a whole lot of subconscious effects on the reader. That's where the fear comes from, that's where the anxiety where the 'hiiiiaaaaa' [sucking in of breath] feeling - you can't breathe! There's a killer coming after you so you have to feel that.

MM: The last scene in *Like clockwork* where she actually does rescue the girl, was very like film for me, where they went back and the killer was missing.

MO: Ja!

MM: I mean that really did give you that eeeeeeeee feeling

MO: eeeeee Ja! I know.

MM: You *had* to know what was going to happen because otherwise you really did get that . . . .
MO: So so so it's more, it was like a merging of two narrative techniques. The book I'm working on now is called *The quarry* –the stills from it are there [she indicates a series of photographs]. I'm working, my main character's an artist and she is being stalked she thinks so she gets Clare to come and find out what's

going on. She's preparing for an exhibition so I've gone back to images in a way. So I approached this artist called Kathryn Smith - she actually teaches at Stellenbosch and she does this amazing conceptual, minimalist, huge, big artwork installation like museum-style pieces. And I said to her, 'Please will you make an artwork for me for this character – 'cause I don't want to do written down pictures I want you to make - so you keep the magic of the experience of an artwork. . . . So we made a little film, now, and um, we're going to do an exhibition. This character's name is Sophia Brown, a character in my novel, she's doing an exhibition that's so few would do so, we've made this kind of imaginary character and its so fantastic for my writing to go back to the – I mean I love conceptual art, but anyway, to go back into that sort of . . . .

MM: So did you make a sort of storyboard of this . . .

MO: Yes we did.

MM: …book as you going along or . . .

MO: It's, it's um… ja, it's a little three minute film; you can contact Kathryn, she lectures in Fine Art at Stellenbosch. She's doing an exhibition at the moment in, um, Sweden, her first solo thing yeah. But it's been such a fascinating process, the art and the writing, and then how we merge the two. So we'll have novel - my novel - which will also be a Clare Hart story. And so Sophie Brown's exhibition . . . .

MM: Did you ask her to get into the mind of this person you have created? Or did you ask her to just do it and then you were going to still create the person?

MO: Well, I've kind of created the artist and her story. She witnesses her mother being murdered when she's a very little girl and then buries the memory. And then - I mean that's an interesting process about writing - about ten or twelve years ago I had an idea for a book called 'An Intimate Geography' which would be a kind of . . . You talked about academic writing; Julia Kristeva wrote a wonderful book – do you know who she is? A French feminist?

MM: Yes, I've heard of her…

MO: Ja, she did an amazing book called *Stavac Martyr* in which she wrote an analysis of the virgin Mary on the one side and then her own experience of giving birth to her son who's actually quite disabled on the other. So you had this academic and this maternal experience. Ja. And I wanted to do this book called 'An Intimate Geography' which would be trying to map out the geography of a female, the mother's body, and the complexity of being a sexual being and the terror of the mother's body for an infant, that it can smother you and – you know all of that stuff..

MM: Yes, interesting psychology.
MO: Ja all of that kind of deep stuff which I actually like writing, kind of write about in my books, the connections. So that simmered along for ages and then I had this idea for *The quarry* which is this new book, and that came to me when they were excavating those skeletons down at Prestwich Street. They were going to do a development. And there was like a sort of lunatic reaction, no one would let them do DNA-testing and find out who they were. And I was so pissed off 'cause I thought you can't care about people if they're dead unless you know who they were. And then suddenly, you know, suddenly you care about them so much 'cause suddenly it's so and so with this name from this place. And that's when I had the idea of my artist character, Sophie Brown, being murdered and her body – I mean this is where the fiction kicks in – her body would sink in amongst these other old skeletons and they find it, the body comes up, all this memory starts to come slowly, slowly. So that was Sophie Brown. So Kathryn is doing this artwork which is . . . that psyche, that personality - what artwork would you make.

MM: That's interesting.

MO: Do you know what I mean?

MM: So you've asked her to decide for herself what kind of art work comes from that . . . .

MO: We discussed it, I mean it's quite interesting; she does a lot of forensic stuff so we had a lot in common anyway. I asked her specifically after I'd seen an exhibition of hers. And the name of the exhibition is 'An Intimate Geography' – do you know what I mean? So it's like . . . .

MM: It all comes together.

MO: You know it's a book I never wrote but it kind of those ideas, I mean they're in there, if you're interested in the creative process, those ideas simmer and stay there because what I wanted to do in that, in that theoretical book I was thinking about in the nineties, was an exploration of child and mother, mother and child. And then now this girl who sees and then forgets that her mother was killed. Her mother was pregnant as well. So she would have this terror and abandonment and all of those kinds of emotions.

MM: Plus the sibling that never arrived as well.

MO: The sibling that never arrived and the, you know the . . .

MM: and that relationship . . .

MO: the great – and she a complex character because she is very sexually . . . takes massive risks all the time. You know the person towards the extreme of those boundaries of life and death – that's where she feels alive and those kind of compulsions interested me. Which of course makes fantastic B-grade . . .

MM: Oh absolutely!

MO: Detective fiction!
MM: Yes, it's wonderful that you managed to get to this lovely sexy stuff after writing for children for so long as well . . .

MO: Well, children are the result of sex I suppose!

MM: Yes.

MO: You have sex on the brain at the time.

MM: Obviously after the book's been published everyone starts drawing comparisons between you and Clare Hart. Almost every interview I've read everyone starts by saying . . .

MO: *Always*

MM: Margie Orford thinks x: and they've taken a quote straight out of what Clare Hart says.

MO: I know.

MM:  While you're actually writing there must be some rules about biographical material . . . .

MO: It's all in Riedwaan.

MM: What's what are problems with that? I mean you don't want it to be you, you want it to be Clare Hart. So how does that affect the writing process? How do you switch yourself off sometimes or how do you bring yourself in? How do you make those judgements?

MO: She's so not me! Clare, I mean its funny she is you, I mean people *always* do that! I had one person who interviewed me who looked *very* disappointed when I arrived and she said, 'you don't look like Clare at all.' So I said, 'I'm not Clare, I'm me.' Clare has influenced me a bit, though, because I never used to run and now since I've started writing about her, I've taken up running

MM: That's interesting, so she actually . . .

MO: And she just . . .

MM: is becoming your sort of role model?

MO: Ja ja ja, and she doesn't smoke and I used to smoke and I had to give up smoking and start up running!

MM: Have you taken up whiskey?

MO: No, I don't like whiskey, I like wine. I made her give up whiskey!

MM: Did you? I was going to ask that.
MO: Ja, she switched from whiskey to wine 'cause I like wine.  I used to write a lot as a teenager and I swore that I wouldn't write fiction until I didn't need to write about myself. And I didn't. And I wrote one of those terrible broken-hearted teenage love stories and then I thought, 'Oh golly, she gets her heart broken. This is ridiculous.' So, for me she's completely separate – she's like a way of seeing the world. So in a way she's a particular lens for me and she interested me as a character because she is damaged and she can't form relationships. I'm the opposite. I've been married for 20 years and I have three children and I live in a family and relationships have been easy for me. Making connections with people have been easy for me. So I was interested in a woman who can't make warm, intimate bonds. And interestingly, this is purely to do with technicalities of writing, I needed with Clare to split off her external emotional, um, thinking competent side from her emotional side, which is her sister, Constance, her twin. So in a way it's like a in fiction where you can make the experience of being a woman in a very misogynistic society real. You have this one, very damaged, pure feeling body, which is Constance, and this other one whose like pure mind, almost. Very defended.

MM: Mmm, who has the ability to completely –

MO: Ja, to cut off and to zone things out. The character who has the most sort of autobiographical stuff is Riedwaan. I find him the easiest. I like him.

MM: Who is he based on then - is it you?

MO: Me.

MM: Oh good. He's the family man.

MO: He's me

MM: Understands relationships

MO: He's flexible and he's like, he's not . . . well I'd like to be like him. I wouldn't really like to be him 'cause I think he's very handsome and I'd like to meet him. He's the character in which I can put . . . you know I have a very flexible view of the world and morality and those sorts of things. And I like his sort of naturalness; he has a natural response, an instinctive response to situations and people, and he's got a good heart.

MM: And he's got a bit of a Roald Dahl sense of natural justice too!

MO: Ja, no exactly.

MM: In a way justice must be done -sort of physically too. He's quite . . .

MO: Ja no no no, he's quite straightforward, but it's interesting the reason I brought him in: a female character she couldn't do half the things I needed her to do, plausibly. You know there's other writers like [Welma Durmid] and stuff who have these kickboxing Lara Croft-like, lesbian, superwomen characters. But I didn't want a superhero, I wanted someone who could do what really goes on.

MM: She's also I think realistically vulnerable.

MO: No, exactly.

MM: Physically too.

MO: It's not safe to do a lot of stuff and you're so conspicuous. Like I wanted to research a brothel and there's this really sad brothel in Bree street called 'Naughty Forty' and its like really . . . sad little curtains and this pathetic little light that flashes and I stood there at the door and I wanted to go in, but *I* can't go in – I can't go in and be invisible in there. Do you know what I mean? It's like really irritating - it's just the limitation of the body.

MM: So it's the female writer writing for a female character, she can only really go where you could go.

MO: Exactly.

MM: In a way . . .

MO: Exactly.

MM: Even though she's such a type of tough chick. Yes, I found that quite realistic, that first of all she is a woman who is intelligent and is able to switch her off her emotions

MO: Ja

MM: And a lot of literature sort of denies women the ability to do that.

MO: Ja, she . . . that's how you function.

MM: Of course you can function, and then on the other hand she's vulnerable. You said this issue about your relationship – you mentioned in one interview, I was fascinated, that your writing of relationships (I didn't know if you meant sexual or romantic) – but you were influenced by or modelled on Milan Kundera

MO: Ja

MM: Now, just tell me a little bit about that. Do you read passages of Milan Kundera before you write sex scenes or do you – how does it work?

MO: No, no, no. I loved, I did my Honours thesis on Milan Kundera and I know a lot of people say he is a very misogynistic writer, that he's unfair to woman. What I loved about how he wrote about relationships and sexuality – there's like a truth to how he writes about how people interact especially around sexual relationships. I remember one character, I think that's *Unbearable lightness of being*. There is the dynamic between a man and a woman, which is set up within the first 20 minutes of them meeting. And he's got a kind of detachment in how he writes - he can write about the sexual and he can write very erotically I think 'cause there's a detachment. What I learnt from him - I mean I don't sit and read it and [then write] something. . . . It's like how writers build up in your mind. He can write almost forensically, but he seems to know that the erotic kick is not in being naked – that's pornography – naked and lots of grunting, that's one thing, but where the compulsion between people would happen. You know what I mean, that the erotic is,

MM: The desire as much as the act?

MO: The desire and how – The other thing I loved about his writing is that, I mean, he was writing the early stuff in reaction to the Soviet - the sort of flattening out of power. And for him the space of the erotic was the last space of privacy and secrecy that couldn't be controlled. In a very violent society like South Africa -especially one that's so violent towards women - the domain of the erotic - if you can defend that – it's like a secret space, if you know what I mean, its something that counters this discipline of public violence, if I can put it that way: it's a rebellious thing to do.

MM: There's such a contrast between Clare's very controlled life and she obviously has a sort of very healthy sex life and so on, and that she's able to maintain that despite this, especially in *Like clockwork* where she's dealing with the very dark side of sexuality and it could put most of us off and so 'not tonight dear I've got a headache' but she still seems to be able to - that's very empowered in a way that she's got that ability to…

MO: Well it's a defiance.

MM: Yes

MO: 'Cause I think she is traumatised but it's a defiance where you won't let the brutality of a rapist invade your –

MM: Your own sexuality –

MO: Your own sexuality. In my other parallel life I'm a patron of Rape Crisis and I was trying to work out – they are all losses that you see when you see someone assaulted like that, you know the days it takes them to get better, the trauma, and I was trying to quantify the loss of sexual desire and how many orgasms you don't have – a woman will not have after sex [rape] and all that like . . . um. . . delight that has no quantifiable monetary value. You can't say it was worth this, but the delight in herself can be

erased and if you can maintain that or get that back then you've like pushed that thing to the edges, if you know what I mean, so it's like a way of keeping it, a way of sort of saying that you will keep that little domain of pleasure and freedom for yourself.

MM: But you said in your interview and it comes up also from that poem you wrote about *Daddy's girl* - I was very interested in that, it was almost like a process poem that you wrote. But it's the - you're aiming for a concise, clear style you said here, sort of memorable, contained, complete. You have these…

MO: Do you have that here? I've forgotten about it. [I did have a copy and showed it to her].

MM: You wrote that on your home page - I've been following a blog of yours and I found that very interesting because its quite that kind of writing you're aiming for, a particular style and I think you answered that earlier when you said you're aiming for things that are precise. Do you aim for short sentences? Do you have any dictums: 'don't use any adverbs', or what are your, sort of you know, writing style goals when you, when you . . . .

MO: My aim is to be as spare and precise as possible: to cut out all the extraneous words 'cause I actually overwrite, too, I think in the beginning, and then to get rid of adverbs, adjectives - *fuss* over descriptions. Today, now, in this manuscript I'm just cutting and as soon as you cut the better it gets.

MM: Does the cutting happen right at the very end? Do you sort of just get everything out and then cut or do you start cutting as you go along?

MO: Ja, I cut as I go along and pare things down and then you know usually if you over-describe something it means you are actually not sure about what you're trying to say. So I'll sit there and think 'OK, what do you want in this long paragraph? And I think, 'What is this guy trying to say?' I think he wants to say 'no', so I just cut it all out - fifty words - and just said 'no', and it was fine.

MM: That's quite harsh.

MO: So I aim for my sort of style, people whose style I love - I love Coetzee's style that sort of complete spareness.

MM: Did he teach you?

MO: Ja, he taught me but, um, I like a very, very pared down style and I think it suits the genre I write in and I think what's also interesting is it's not associated really with a feminine style and women's' writing. So I love verbs – action; they're stories about people doing stuff, so the more you can get things into a verb – subject, verb is my ideal sentence.

MM: Good dictum there. Your books sell widely in many countries. What conception do you have of who your audience is and who is the audience? How do they exist in your brain?

MO: No idea. I have no idea at all who buys them. I feel like in all those big overseas, I mean my sales have been amazing in Germany – those are the only ones I have had figures from. Um I have no idea, I feel like it happened to somebody I met once at a dinner party and I pretend now to be her best friend. It feels utterly dissociated from me.
MM: So you don't really write towards an audience, you actually, are you writing to? What are you writing towards, a genre then? Or do you write to your publisher or write to yourself? How do you . . . .

MO: I write to, no I mean, I do think of who's going to read my books and I think that, I mean I've worked with books all my life and people love stories that are well told and that move or that grip them.

MM: So you're writing towards the goal of the story rather than writing towards an audience?

MO: Ja.

MM: You don't get influenced by – you blog and sometimes people reply . . . . You get fan mail, does that ever influence . . . .

MO: I get mad people. Mad people write to me. I had one guy wrote to me and he said he is so and so he loved my book and please could I give him the address of the strip club in *Like clockwork*!

MM: Ah, no!

MO: So I said, ja. I said its just, well, I'm very sorry to tell you but it exists only in my forty-four-year-old brain. So –

MM Did he want to get inside your forty-four-year-old brain?

MO: Oh no. I, um, well I suppose – I don't really think of the – I just think of getting the story told in the best way, so to me it's completely amazing when people like them and what they like and why how they respond and what they don't like and it's like . . .

MM: Like a surprise to you?

MO: You know there's so many people that read your books that you can't really – I mean what interests me is a lot of people say to me, 'I've never read'. They read because they know me and they so. 'I've never read a crime book before and it was really good.'

MM: Well, I don't really read crime books very often, I have to admit.

MO: That I find interesting.

MM: Because I met you first and then decided to read some of your books and then 'cause I needed an author and read them and my husband started stealing them from me and we ended up at bedtime going 'My turn!' and 'My turn!' 'But what page are you on? You're further, then it's my turn!' 'Yes, but I'm closer to the end so I have to read!'. And he doesn't read novels very much, he reads non-fiction usually, and I often read sort of 'chick lit', humorous stuff and so on. We were both gripped and keen for the next one and so on.
MO: But you see I think that's not 'cause its crime or not crime, it's because some stories are well told, like how they are told captures you.

MM: Mmm, also the issues that were involved and the fact that it's South African - I think we were both very interested in the issues as well so we thought that, you know, the rape and the trafficking and the street kids - you really do build those in in a way which isn't somehow sort of patronising or generalising – a lot of people add those in as decoration.

MO: No, I mean that's the thing with distilling stuff, though that's the hardest thing, is to make the environment in which your characters move seem to have complete verisimilitude – they are just in them and it must seem natural. You know one of the things I was thinking when I started writing here is that I

read a lot of South African books and I'd think, 'Now why is this Constantia housewife in a shebeen in Kayalitsha? '

MM: Yes

MO: You know what I mean?

MM: Implausible

MO: Yes, it was completely implausible and what was plausible, the only people that did go anywhere, were cops and journalists. Nobody says to you if you arrive in the middle of Kayalitsha in a shebeen, if you say, 'I'm a journalist doing a story,' everyone will say, 'OK' – they accept that you're there, they might not want you there, they might love that you're there, but its not peculiar that you're there.

MM: To them you are plausible too.

MO: Yes, so as soon as you have that level of believability in your story, then the rest of it can be more - if you have that initial premise of . . . weird; you won't believe anything.

MM: Yes

MO: If you know what I mean?

MM: Clare Hart's premise is quite tricky in a way 'cause she's not a cop

MO: She's not a cop but the cops do hire in experts, you know they do that all the time, so . . . she can she can do that.

MM: And she's Dr Hart so she's sort of very good in that South Africans like status

MO: Ja, they like doctors – everyone likes doctors

MM: Ja, so it's very good that she's . . .
MO: Ja ja ja, I mean in a way the audience I think of most is my South African audience, in a way its like trying to find ways of reflecting South Africa. And then I think overseas people are really interested because you, like, it's nice to read books that really bring a place to life. You know, if you've read *The god of small things*, for instance, you can imagine Caroline - you're there.

MM: Also genres in a way need new settings all the time to keep them fresh

MO: Ja

MM: Otherwise it gets dull. Your genre – you said it's got its conventions. Do you ever feel you've got a bit of a pattern you've got to fill and –

MO: You know I wish I wish I did

MM: Then you . . . break it?

MO: No, I wish I had a pattern. I wish I'd gone more for the template 'cause my books are actually quite different. This new book, *Daddy's girl,* is very different.

MM: The first two are different too. The…

MO: Ja

MM: There's actually quite a difference. I read *Blood rose* first and then *Like clockwork* and I was surprised by *Like clockwork's* patterns – it was quite different from *Blood rose*.

MO: Ja, I was really stupid, I should have gone for that more formula thing, because this new one, um *Daddy's girl*, happens over three days so it's very intense. It was a very difficult book to write and the next one, *The quarry*, is not even really a police procedural at all. So it would have been better if I'd had a pattern.

MM: Better for whom though?

MO: For me.

MM: Better for the story or better for you? Easier you mean rather than –

MO: Easier, it would have been easier. But it hasn't worked out for me to have a that sort of pattern 'cause I'm not so interested in, I don't know the police procedural – there are like a whole lot of social things that I want to write about – memory and loss of a daughter and then I was thinking what happens if there are boys? How do you make people care about boys dying, which is difficult - to make anyone care about a teenage boy? Or I find it difficult to care about them. Um so I haven't really got a formula, what there is always, in the beginning is some kind of disruption of stasis and then resolution at the end.
MM: So you've got a basic pattern but you're not following a thriller formula; this actually comes across in the books, they don't feel –

MO: Yes

MM: Formulaic - but a bit like Jodi Picoult, you do have a little bit of a pattern.

MO: Ja ja, I mean I do in that there's always an investigation of sorts.

MM: Yes, and Clare Hart has to, obviously has to get called in, so there's that and it ends slightly happily, well with your closure and so on.

MO: Ja, ja, so there's those sorts of – so in a way what's more constant for me through the books is the relationship between Clare and Riedwaan and how that will –

MM: Wouldn't you get bored if it were a pattern? I mean you said it would be easier, but is easy what you're after? You don't strike me as someone who is after easy?

MO: No, I'm not, I would get bored rigid, I imagine, and what would you say the second time round? You know what I mean?

MM: You'd have to come up with a new adjective or new verb

MO: Ja ja ja, so it was I mean my life has been so varied in what I've done and the work that I've done, and I suppose its sort of a response to that in a sense.

MM: You said that you come across very clearly in the books as a woman with a message and a woman with a mission, you aren't just telling an exciting story – well you want to tell an exciting story – you've got to titillate and it's got to be interesting in so many ways. But you've got these messages as well that come out quite strongly -you've got a mission - you've got a clear idea about women in society, for example, and the whole idea of the subliminated war on women has come out of not having had a civil war, for example in *Like clockwork*. How do you balance while you're writing, while keeping it entertaining, 'cause you've got to do that obviously, and keeping more or less within the genre even though you're not working with a pattern and getting this message of your across, 'cause that must create a bit of tension while you write?

MO: Part of it, ja. I mean you have to be careful because readers hate sociology, it they wanted sociology they would go and do UNISA. Ja, in a way having somebody like Clare Hart, she sees things in a particular way – she responds to violence in particular way– so I kind of filter it through how she would react to things. Other characters who are not like that don't – they do other stuff. If you know what I mean? What I've tried to get, is to keep it in character and then you'd have your reactions and comments according to how a character would treat it, how they would respond to it. Then you get these sort of feminist responses, 'cause a feminist who's bothered by violence against women will see patterns that somebody who's not aware of those things won't see.
MM: And she quotes statistics every now and then. It's amazing you've managed to bring that in without making it sound like a –

MO: But you know that's how you would research something, that's how you would find it out, I would imagine in if you're trying to work out why someone's dead.

MM: Yes, that's true.

MO: [answers telephone. Irrelevant conversation] Sorry. Um so that message thing, I write it first. I then go through the book and take out anything that would be out of character, if you know what I mean.

MM: Yes.

MO: So it would be completely in character to find out those things and maybe that's why it's not irritating because it's a logical thing to do.

MM: Well, you ask forensic people questions; well, the policeman asks the forensic person . . .

MO: I go and ask people and that's what they tell me. They break down death statistics, I'm working now with how they've broken down death statistics, of how many women were killed inside and outside and how many were under twelve and how many like this. You know what I mean, those stats exist.

[Omitted: irrelevant conversation on the body farms in the USA – mostly initiated by MacRobert]

MM: While you're planning your book at the very beginning do you ever work with anyone else or is it completely something you do alone? Your agents get involved, or your husband gets involved?

MO: Not my husband, shame. No I don't share my writing with anyone who's close to me in the beginning. It's the biggest disaster 'cause the poor person doesn't know how to react, you know what I mean, so I keep that very separate. Like with the synopsis – I'll put that out and discuss that back and forth a bit with my agent and she'll look at things and say, you know, how are you going to resolve this or that? Or where is it going go? But . . .

MM: Do you find it quite hard

MO: No no no, I'm very incredibly cooperative. No no no, I don't mind being edited and I don't mind that, sort of, with my publishers as well: if they've got questions and queries they're incredibly useful. I mean I love being edited. Totally. I mean it's like to me you get to a point where the input of an outside person is amazingly valuable. I might or might not change what they've suggested, but usually if something bothers someone, it might not be wrong *there*, its because it's – people notice things that are not quite right and you might have left out a detail earlier or something. So if they flag it, its like instead of reacting: 'Aaahhhh they don't like my book', I think , Why has this thing come up? And it almost always is the things that have bothered me a bit as well.

MM: is it something that you – living the story in your head – do you find that the other person's spotted where you haven't actually put into the book what was in your head?

MO: Yes, there might, yes, or that I've left things out or that I've put in too much detail or it's something just awkward.

MM: Have you ever had a continuity glitch?

MO: Oh many.

MM: Many?

MO: Many.

MM: 'Cause I wrote a book and found out afterwards I'd killed off someone's father and then resurrected him!

MO: Ja, many, many of those.

MM: 'Cause they're usually spotted by someone else.

MO: Yes, the editor will find that and then they say, 'Why is this dead body having a tea party?'

MM: It's always funny!

MO: But I'm very confident of my own ability to sustain things. I mean I think that's one of they key things that allows you to write a book. It's that you're going to have a totality of vision and that's in a way what works with film directing. Its completely hierarchical being a film director: you have to have a totality of vision of what you want to create before it s made. If you know what I mean, and when things happen you think, 'OK that's part of the picture'. Writing is the same: you have to have this kind of megalomaniac vision about what your book will be otherwise you get lost.

MM: What's your most effective planning tool? Do you draw a very big picture for yourself and then you check up on that later? Following your archipelago the right way?
[The recording is indistinct here as Orford moved to another room to hunt for some of her rough work.]

MO: I'll show you one . . . big like poster things map everything out, the first one, and then I know this character is doing this and this one's doing this. So I do that – in this last book I've also done that.

MM: Do you collage it a bit or do you sketch, how do you…?
MO: Um

MM: Is it just squiggles mainly?

MO: No no no I draw. The *Daddy's girl* I did is a circle. I had her in the middle, this little girl who had been abducted and all the things that go on around them, its like a black hole around this vanished child. *Like clockwork* was linear. So I had this body found and then I mapped out who was where 'cause you kind of need to keep a picture of where everybody is even if they are off scene, off the stage.

MM: do you sort of stick it up in your room while you're working for the entire project?

MO: Oh no no no, just at key points I'll map it out and see what's missing. Like in this rewrite thing now I need to - there's a couple of threads in the plot where I'm going to need to do that. So this one I had a table of scenes. I've used different things . . . . It was ridiculous like you had a spreadsheet thing and then I had this character: this is the chapter-and this is here and this is the clue and I could like, um . . . .

MM: Did it help you keep track of clues and picking up on . . . ?

MO: Ja, and it makes you visualise the whole picture and then chunks of it and then right down to the detail.

MM: Did you learn to do that in film or is it, um . . . ?

MO: Ja, in film I used storyboards

MM: So this is almost like a storyboard

MO: Ja ja ja kind of. Its using the same techniques and I worked in publishing as well where you use flat plans which is like, you know, you do the double page spreads and then kind of map out.

MM: Yes, double page spreads and things

MO: Map out where things will be. And I kind of map – you have beginning and end and in that your reader needs little climaxes and so you pace - it's a way of pacing those out.

MM: So you actually plan, sort of, you know after these several pages you're going to have a lift? Or is it –

MO: I don't plan it, no no. I write it and then I look at it and then I draw the diagram in response to what I've written, if you know what I mean. In response to the first draft. And then I'll see its like too compressed or too spread out and um – it's organic.

MM: 'Cause the book gets quite fast toward the end doesn't it?

MO: Yes.

MM: There's that sense of everything coming to the end. So do you sort of plan that in that you're going to have to have lots of threads come together at once?

MO: It just sort of happens like that. You know in a way you've got all this investigation, you're asking lots of open-ended questions and you don't know where they are going to go, and then suddenly things start falling away or you have a piece of luck or something and then you get that rush feeling in the end.

MM: Yes, 'cause that's something I've always been interested in – in books they tend to – the good story plots have this wonderful 'where everything comes together' feeling. I wonder, how do authors really plan for that moment when everything . . . ?

MO: If your plot is working it kind of just happens.

MM: OK, so it depends on that initial plan that you did?

MO: Ja.

MM: Basically holding through the whole writing process.

MO: This one, *Daddy's girl*, now because it's a three-day plot one has to have – I wanted to give the reader a feeling of unbearable 'not being able to breathe'. Because this child is gone. Imagine your child is gone and you have to find – I mean it must be like the *worst* – so I give the reader that feeling of just like a galloping train right from the start. So there's like –

MM: A panic.

MO: This happens and this happens and then there's this panic. Controlled panic and you try and function in that situation of panic. So the pace has to be like ccccccrchhhhhhhhhh [a long intake of breath, as if in panic].

MM: Page turner. Well you've got that right so far, so I'm dying to read the next one! Have you ever been part way through and you said some of your ideas just haven't panned out? Have you ever been part way through a story and then realised that your original plot is not working at all or has it not happened and has your plan basically held? You know that horrible moment where you thought you weren't going to . . . .

MO: Yes many, many, many but, um, kind of in a way you make your plot work if you know what I mean; you have the basic premise – like a little girl's kidnapped by bad people and held in a horrible place and found by her dad; you know that she lives because you've read *Like clockwork*. It s a prequel that I've written.

MM: Ah, oh! Is it Riedwaan's child?

MO: Riedwaan's child.

MM: I thought it was like him maybe or –

MO: Ja no no, it's his child

MM: Oh my goodness, that's going to be really good!

MO: So you know she lives.

MM: Yes.

MO: And you know that she only just lives but a person reading it who hasn't read it before wouldn't know that. So I have that and that is a fairly basic and gripping story, if you know what I mean. So then its up to me to, like, I have got some like real plot glitches but its more . . . it's like applying your mind and making it work 'cause I know that the basic story is good. He abducts, he's suspected of being behind her abduction, her disappearance so he's a suspect; you've got like good tension. 'Cause the mother wants to go to Canada - remember they want to emigrate.

MM: Yes. Oh, so she's suspecting him of um . . . ah!

MO: So it could be

MM: So its these complications in the plot

MO: Yeah, they've split up and you know there's a conflict. What I was interested in as well is a little girl disappears but what happens when a couple splits and they're fighting and all those little crevices – she just falls through a little gap because her parents aren't talking to each other. She waits on the pavement and then she's gone.

MM: Also with all the bad fathering and things how does the new mother trust the father?

MO: All of that stuff, all of that stuff! And they've had custody disputes before and he's kept her over so it's like normal human stuff, I mean, you've probably as well – you'll know friends who've gotten divorced and the fights between two what were very nice people – its just unbearable, their irrationality!

MM: There was that awful story about a father, just an ordinary couple, but he for a change was taking the children to the nursery and the three children drop off at school and then the baby in the car seat and he saw –

MO: you mean the professor at UCT?

MM: You want to just throttle the man and at the same time you think, You know it could happen!' and you think 'Oh my god, it could happen!' Because you know that when you're busy and distracted and the baby's sleeping and . . .

MO: And you're doing something else . . .

MM: And they're behind you . . .

MO; And it's out of your normal routine and that's when these things happen and I know its one of your worst nightmares as a parent. I mean you've raised three, I'm still surviving one, and you know. The one drifts off . . . .

MO: But you *know* in a way so you write or you try to write in that space where people, ordinary people who would just . . . . You can imagine that sort of misunderstanding

MM: And because he's a good man, but has also had problems like . . .

MO: Ja, he so . . . he's just a regular guy, but ja, there's like all that sort of stuff.

MM: All those questions.

MO: All those questions.

MM: There was a children's writer once who said while she was writing a story about something else a group of elves arrived and said, 'We're in your story,' and she said, 'There are no elves in this story,' and they said, 'Well, we're here now'. I don't remember any elves in Clare Hart's story. But has it ever happened to you that a character or a –

MO: Living near Sea Point up here might be a couple of fairies!

MM: Ah yes, that's true. Have any characters sort of arrived that –

MO: Ja

MM: You didn't plan for, didn't expect and you were quite surprised?

MO: Yes they do, especially cameo characters, and then you have to give them a bigger role.

MM: Where do they come from?

MO: I don't know where they come from. I mean sometimes I mean I love the little like side characters, the little sketchy characters. But they just sort of come and then they're such interesting . . . um . . . or you just kind of like them and then they just have to like muscle into the story and stay there. But I suppose the imagination is quite a marvellous thing and sometimes the way of resolving a story or a plot manifests itself in a character, but it's like a way of you sort of think . . . OK, this is a way of solving this.
MM: Do you ever get epiphanies in the middle of the night?

MO: I do.

MM: Do you keep a notebook by your bed?

MO: Ja I do, and I read it in the morning and I think, 'What the fuck does this say?'

MM: What do you do when you're driving along and you have ideas?

MO: Oh, I just write them down.

MM: Do you? On the steering wheel? Because I've done that

MO: No no, I pull over usually, or I tell my children to write it down

MM: Ah, so children as scribes!

MO: –- you know usually epiphany things; if its really a good idea, you won't lose it.

MM: That's true.

MO: You know what I mean it's usually the culmination of a whole lot of thinking so you will kind of remember what it is. I have sent text messages to myself when I don't have any writing things.

MM: Dictate onto your phone?

MO: Ja.

MM: That's usually quite easy.

MO: And then they also make no sense!

MM: Yes that's also

MO: 'Man run over red bus' [she was giving an example of a cryptic dictation onto a phone].

MM: You do quite a lot of research in your books on top of what you already know from your documentary writing. You did ballistic sort of training – you went to see forensics, you learnt to shoot. When you're starting your planning process or you're mapping out, so you say, 'Well for this in order to write this I need to go and do that'. Or while you're writing this you think, 'My writing is sounding crap, I need to find out how to fire a gun?'

MO: No, I think if I'm going to do this I need – this is what I need to know.

MM: So you actually give yourself a shopping list, almost?

MO: Ja?

MM: In the beginning of what you need to learn?

MO: Ja ja, I do and then I find out about those things. Because you can't imagine half of those things and if you did you would be wrong. And those kinds of details are very important to get right. And people also do think – I mean I love interviewing people. I'm partly interviewing them to find out how they do things and I partly interviewing them to see it informs, how I make, character. Not that I copy them down, but how they react to the particularly stressful jobs that they do.

MM: Forensic?

MO: Ja, and it's often in small detail.

MM: Hmm, well I notice that all your characters – which is horrifying to anyone who hasn't – I'm married to a doctor but – when they sort of do their autopsies he said in the beginning you can't stand it; you feel nauseated, and he said in the end you stand there with your friends, fellow students eating sandwiches while dissecting the body.

MO: Exactly.

MM: And I noticed you kept that – it came across in your the book they actually go straight from looking at pictures of dismembered bodies to having . . .

MO: To a meal.

MM: To the most delicious lunch. And your senses reading it go through quite a 'whoooo' because you're thinking – 'whooo' delicious lunch, 'whoooo' horrible body!

MO: But that's how people function.

MM: Yes, coming from also your interviews from –

MO: Ja, I come from a very medical family so I have like a fairly high revulsion. Ummm. But it, ja, you see how people behave, how they handle it. I mean part of is you deal with a dead body and then you eat – your eating makes you feel that you're alive, if you know what I mean. So it's interesting to me how many, how much people do those kind of . . . . They're often unaware of it.

MM: Yes.

MO: The delight. I mean, at the mortuary in Salt River, the guy who was the Prof. there planted all these beautiful rose bushes. So it's this hideous building with the most gorgeous - there's this old gay professor and its like abundant roses and it's just like a counter-tool. You can't make all that horrible stuff go away but you can still grow roses. Do you know what I mean?
MM: Yes, absolutely. Ja, I've seen a lot with the medical world; its sort of like being beautiful is quite important.

MO: But it's also that necessary detachment – its not a heartless detachment; it's that same thing of keeping a space for desires separate. It's not taking on all the sufferings of the world. That's interesting in the female character – women are more inclined to feel guilt by association, trauma by association. Men are more boundaried, if you know what I mean, so that's how you carry on.

MM: yes, that's very true. Then you, um . . . . I, one more little thing there in your poem about *Daddy's girl*, you've got this lovely verse with 'desire lived brief and the invisible sound of black hair tumbling over a child's flat cheek'. You get a sense of the love of language in the way you write. Um, and that's quite a creative thing too. Are you also – do you sometimes play with word associations? Word play, does a word spark a part of the plot. Also –

MO: Mm, I love the texture – my agent calls it the texture of language. One of her comments is, "I can see you got lost in the texture of language and you have to cut." But, hmm, no but I love concrete language where you make the experience of the smell, the sound, the senses visible in words that you put down.
So you kind of jumble up the . . . those kind of sensual experiences. So I do play with language but also what you need to do, this sort of style I like is actually quite contained. I don't like flowery language, I love imagery. So I try to write so you've got an image like that image of the cheek, and her hair is something that would move a parent so much. Its just the little detail of her, but if you've seen a child there's something about – it just makes you picture the whole little girl.

MM: Hmm.

MO: Just that one image, so it's more like trying to find imagery that will distil that essence of what makes you respond to a child.

MM: Have you seen Kathe Kollwitz, a German etcher, whose beautiful etchings and sculptures are a lot like Rodin's sculptures [period]? There was an exhibition of hers in Grahamstown and one of – a few years ago – and one of the pictures was of, um, the poverty and her husband I think was a doctor and it was the poverty of the people, persons around him. And one picture was of a little girl with very fine fine fine blonde hair, the real child's blonde hair you don't get in an older woman. And there's this adult man with gnarled gnarled gnarled fingers and the child is lying dying in bed of a plague or one of these things and he's pulled the child's hair –

MO: Ahh!

MM: and this old hand with this fine . . . and all in black and white –

MO: Ja.
MM: And the light sort of just catches that bit and it could be a horribly sentimental picture, but I actually had to sort of leave the gallery and come back again later because it was so nice. In your book you had the moment with the mother at the end *Like clockwork* where she tries to absorb her child back into her body and I thought, yes that's . . . you've got in the words there, you've got that feeling you sometimes get –

MO: Mmmm. Ja, ja.

MM: When you've been worried about a child to just –

MO: I think that's –

MM: . . . absorb – so you've used a verb there again haven't you?

MO: Ja, so its like those images are what make literature come alive.

MM: Hmm, how do you hunt them down when you're writing something flat, what do you do? You can get sort of . . .

MO: You know you . . . just it's that precision thing again, it's that precision of feeling, its like going exactly into that place and feeling, dissecting all the layers of the feeling until you get to the essence of it.

MM: Do you write down sometimes lots and lots of . . . Until you get it right?

MO: Ja, I mean that's why I get so many notebooks. I mean its very hard to talk about a child disappearing for me, having so many children, so it was hard to get to that preciseness.

MM; Mmm, ja, just sort of imagine it happening to you in a way

MO: Well you do!

MM: Ja.

MO: You have to feel it.

MM: yes.

MO: So you feel that stuff anyway, so then you . . . so it's like a . . . so I write and write and write until that image comes up.

MM: When you're absorbed in the middle of all of these images and then this very intense process of imagining and trying to make it as real and precise as possible, how do you cope with going back to being a mother and fetching the kids from school and then one of them's late? How do you sort of balance?

MO: I hired an au pair

MM: Just. OK

MO: Ja no literally, literally, 'cause it just drove me totally nuts. I would want to kill them if they were two minutes late so I got – I delegate while I'm writing – then I get someone to do those things.

MM: OK, and how do you go back to the dinner table and cook supper, how do you get your detachment when you've been so involved in this book. You wrote that when you finished *Daddy's girl* you just –

MO: Ja.

MM: Sort of slumped.

MO: Ja, I know.

MM: How do you balance it while you're writing? Because obviously you have to . . . to function

MO: It's really hard.

MM: Like Clare Hart you have to function.

MO: It's really hard. I mean I do, like, hire the help I need where I need it. Um, and that helps a lot. Not everyone . . . I mean I was lucky to be able to afford to do that. But like when I'm really absorbed I just stay quite detached . . . but it's more like I balance my year out – my year out rather than my days out.

MM: OK.

MO: I've always worked a lot and travelled a lot and worked a lot in my brain so my girls are kind of used to that.

MM: Do you take a break during the day at all just sort of relieve the intensity of –

MO: Ja, I have some lunch and I usually go to gym – I'll often do some exercise at the end of the day and we always have supper together, We don't have a TV so we don't . . . . We chat and talk and stuff. But I'm quite do you know what I mean; it is quite an intense process, when I'm really into it I'll go away on my own.

MM: Oh, is that when you go for a retreat?

MO: Or I'll send them all away or I'll just work all the time. It's not a very sane thing to do

MM: How many hours can you work at a stretch before you actually need to come up for air?

MO: Until I can't see

MM: So is it the eyes that give in first?

MO: Ja, when I worked on *Daddy's girl* I worked probably for about five months every single day – weekends –you know I'm quite obsessive so then I'll just go until its done.

MM: Do you find –

MO: But I work all day, I mean, I really work all day, like a job.

MM: Ja, I mean it definitely is a job; its just its the stretches interest me. You do you just make a cup of tea after two hours? Just like a –

MO: Oh ja, no no no, ja, then I'll come and have some tea and then I go back up to my room again.

MM: Do you walk around the garden a bit

MO: Ja.

MM: In-between?

MO: And have little breaks and l kind of . . . my brain sort of gets too hot and then I go . . . I have a bed in my studio I like to lie down in my little bed for a bit.

MM: Yes, My mom's an artist and she says a bed in the studio – they're not a real artist if they don't have a bed. When I saw your bed I thought, 'That's there – she's a real working artist.'

MO: It's funny when you're creating you get very tired, its like a different type of tiredness, it's like someone sucked all the oxygen out of your brain so you can do this really intense think. I lay down actually just before you came 'cause I suddenly resolved something that had been bothering me. It was like five lines that I wrote and then I just completely . . . but the thinking has taken so long and then I just lie on my bed and have a little nap and you don't really sleep you just go into like a . . . I actually did before I wrote it, I thought, thought, thought, thought and I lie down on my bed and then I think, OK that's how it must be.

MM: That little gap actually helps gel all the thinking together . . . .

MO: That's a form of meditation, I suppose, 'cause you just lie down and you close your eyes and you let your mind . . . and then like some subliminal things connect.

MM: So you think the subconscious is coming into play when you're having a rest in a way or is that –
MO: Hmmm I think so, it's almost as if the brain is divided into the cerebral brain and the feeling brain, they both think but they think in different ways

MM: That little rest helps connect the whole thing?

MO: Ja, ja, well it's like a little absence from yourself, do you know what I mean? It's like a –

MM: Out of yourself in a way.

MO: I often feel it in my body like this sort of tingly feeling, almost like a from of arousal I suppose, 'cause its like a physical response, like a physical thought rather than a mental –

MM: Is that feeling in your chest at all . . . ?

MO: No, I it's in my skin

MM: it's in your skin

MO: It's in your skin.

MM: I asked . . . psychologist said your sort of breast bone.

MO: And in my here, ja, in your solar plexus, the like centre of yourself.

MM: There's a psychologist who says that there is actually a physiological reaction to certain kinds of states so of being.

MO: Hmmm.

MM: Is that a happy feeling when you have that?

MO: It's a very exhilarating feeling, very exhilarating feeling.

MM: I'm happy you said that, it links with something else I read completely years ago, that's very interesting. Um, right. We are down to some more nitty-gritty again. You said you work first in all your - those little moleskine notebooks. Is there a reason you use the moleskine notebooks or are they just for romantic to all writers because they are very appealing.

MO: Its partly romantic – its nice to write in for me, I like an aesthetic space and you can see my studio is very tidy and clean and I like flowers and so for me those little moleskines are nice objects. I like to have a nice pen that feels nice in my hand. I used to write in reporter's notebooks and stuff and they would get lost. You know what I mean, they're just kind of ephemeral. Those little things [moleskins]– they look like books. I can sort of keep them and I number them and I go back to them when I'm working on a book. I'll go find the book where I worked on that particular chapter. So it's an aesthetic thing and I'm sure I would wish I was a Picasso or Bruce Chatwin or something.
MM: Yes no, you're imagining…

MO: But there's a nice association with it, you know what I mean.

MM: You're part a part of a community of writers?

MO: And everyone now gives them to me for my birthdays and Christmas.

MM: Ah that's handy, so you don't have to write them off your tax or anything like that?

MO: No no no, and everybody now knows that I like those notebooks. I have hundreds so I'll actually have to write hundreds more!

MM: They're a specific size, aren't they, they're sort of A5? Is that your nicest size? Do you write across the pages? Its sort of a –

MO: I write about one page, one page. No they fit in my handbag and they're nice

MM: So portability is also quite a thing

MO: Ja

MM: And when you write you choose a laptop, you said your most precious possession – in your website interview – was a laptop and you would rescue it from fire . . . . Why laptop, not deskto cause that's quite interesting?

MO: Because its way less ugly and its small and I move, I mean I like to –

MM: to take you . . .

MO: I do take it with me – not always – but I usually take it with me and worry about it getting stolen and never do any work. But its just 'cause it's easy to carry around and I can just take it up and down to my little spot.

MM; Ah so you write in the house and then write –

MO: And then also computers are so ugly!

MM: I see in décor magazines, they only have laptops these days that's one of those things. Software? Are you just using Word and –

MO: Yes.

MM: And all that sort of same . . . and you prefer writing in your little studio space up there

MO: I do write in cafes and things sometimes but mainly I like being up there. Just if I'm really lonely and got –

MM: Do you sometimes go to the café, oh, for company?

MO: Just to be surrounded by noise.

MM: OK, from families . . . When you're out and you're doing your shooting lessons and all that stuff how do you capture the experience? You've done films, you video things, do you record it or do you just write data?

MO: I write data, I mean I take notes while I'm there, like reporter's notes about how the things work and stuff.

MM: OK.

MO: And then usually before I even drive home I'll write a sort of impression of the place., if you know what I mean, and how people interact but they're just notes and then I let those sort of filter through.

MM: OK, sort of build a person while you're writing, you let it just sort of sink in.

MO: I let it just sink and be there. Otherwise you write awkward chapters in which you turn a visit you made to a chapter in the book and then you like it 'cause you've written it but it's actually not –

MM: Not good for the book.

MO: No.

MM: Yes, I think that comes out sometimes. Um, when you're really into this whole writing process you said you write by hand and then you type. How does the transfer happen from the handwriting to the typing?

MM: Sometimes I get somebody to just type out my notebooks for me.

MM: OK, an agency or a friend?

MO: ja, someone I don't know at all. Um and then and sometimes I'll type it up myself if I'm, like, writing; sometimes what I'll do I'll write one day and type it up the next day 'cause I kind of shape things. I try not to edit – I try to type exactly what I've written and then edit it if you know what I mean. 'Cause and I find that it's quite a useful process, the writing it and then the reading, the deciphering it usually, and then the typing up kind of makes you locate yourself in that chapter.

MM: OK, so its actually part of your writing process.

MO: Ja, very much

MM: Almost as if . . . transferring. And how does it feel when you see it on the screen if someone else has typed it for you?

MO: Oh fine.

MM: So it jumps at you?

MO: No no no, its . . . I do need to then go through it; I usually go read through my notebooks and what's on the screen but I know pretty much what I've written.

MM: Wwhat you've written.

MO: Ja, I actually type faster than I write. I'm a very very fast typist but writing by hand is different, is has that physiological feeling it goes from here [she gestured to her chest] to the hand to the page.

MM: So the page can –

MO: Ja, whereas when you're typing it goes from here [she gestures to her head] out your fingertips.

MM: From your head?

MO: It bypasses your heart.

MM: OK, so you find the hand – that's interesting, 'cause I think that's something Julia Cameron says as well, that writing longhand is a better tap into your . . .

MO: That's what I say to people who write non-fiction: write by hand when you start if you're writing an academic essay; write your plan and stuff by hand. You have to feel it if you write it.

MM: And only then do you start . . .

MO: And then

MM: So turning it into typing is when the whole process becomes cerebral.

MO: Ja, its externalising it, ja.

MM: OK, that's very interesting. And then you say your handwriting is quite messy – are you able to read your own handwriting?

MO: Most of it.
MM: Most of it and . . . um

MO: I make up the bits . . . .

MM: These are sounding like silly questions but actually quite important, so there's actually lots coming up. What's your spelling ability like?

MO: I is a writer I is not a speller.

MM: Is not a speller?

MO: I'm not a speller nor a grammarer!

MM: Are you not a speller or a grammarer? They're both flaws for you and does that slow you down at all? Does it like . . . ?

MO: No no, I mean I kind of find out how things are spelled. I have like great control over language but I'm not particularly . . . I don't particularly care about formally correct grammar. So I use language – shape it how I want it to be, if you know what I mean.

MM: And then who does the final spelling and stuff?

MO: My editors.

MM: So you completely –

MO: Ja no, apostrophes and all of that stuff. Ja no, and I don't see it, even if it's – I see it as correct.

MM: So the proofreading you completely leave to someone else.

MO: Ja, I *try* to do it.

MM: You don't actually –

MO: But it's utterly farcical.

MM: Uhum, that's brilliant news for me, but it's actually something that's . . . . It actually contradicts some people's theories, which makes me very happy.

MO: I think writers start worrying about spelling and grammaring and stuff, punctuation, often too early in the process, so you get afraid of what you're writing and then you start nitpicking details, and I mean it has to be perfect and right, um, and *Like clockwork* I actually had it re-edited 'cause it was so badly edited.

MM: Ja, there were a few things in the final chapter.
MO: Ja terrible. Ja, so that's been completely edited, so my new publisher is bringing out a new addition.

MM: Yes

MO: Greatly improved. So I value it highly, but it's just . . . if you worry about it too early –

MM: Is it something you think is, actually, for a creative writer possibly better that someone else does in the final . . . .

MO: No, I think that you should polish your stuff to the best of your ability 'cause in that polishing at in the final phases you do polish the manuscript in all sorts of ways.

MM: Because of course you're doing all your paring down of your writing . . .

MO: Ja.

MM: And so . . .

MO: Ja, so I try and do it but I know that there's loads of stuff that I just don't see that editors see and pick up. You know what I mean. But if you start worrying early on about whether you spell intuitively with two n's or – you know what I mean – then you're actually distracting yourself – it's like checking your email.

MM: Ja no, split infinitives!

MO: Ja, and people speak in split infinitives all the time.

MM: We write in them too!

MO: Exactly.

MM: It's become accepted now.

MO: Now, I know.

MM: You obviously work into a sort of draft that sounds like . . . Then you've got to sort of – how many drafts do you work? The drafting process, how does that work for you? It seems like you write in books first and then you type.

MO: Ja

MM: And then from the typing, where does it go from there? I'm not quite clear on that. Are you?

MO; I'll show you. This book I've already written about twenty times [Here Margie goes off to some room in her main house where she seems to store the messier bits of her writing process, such as her ring-bound printed drafts, story-boards, etc. She allowed me to photograph a sample of these pages].

MO: I've worked though it about 30 times.

MM: Oh my goodness, what a pile – my golly!

MO: OK, so what I do, you can see . . .

MM: I've dropped my pen

MO: So this is where it starts – typed up notes.

MM: Ah wait, hang on – may I take a photo?

MO: Working out my plans, different plans . . .

MM: That's the storyboard isn't it?

MO: Kind of this . . . its like . . . drawings.

MM: Yes.

MO: Thank you very much [saying goodbye to the domestic].

MM: Absolutely . . . Sorry.

MO: Going to get a taxi . . . [also to the domestic].

[Lots of sounds and mumbling]

MO: OK another one of my mad foibles: when I'm writing I can't . . . have anyone strange in the house so the house gets dirtier and dirtier and dirtier, and when I'm not writing I get a cleaning service who comes in once every two weeks. So I start like – this was written this was from long ag – it was going to be a five day book. Then I do those sorts of things

MM: Right

MO: I do things like this, working out who's where

MM: Right that's the table

MO: Yes that's my sort of written table, so this is the very first draft – April 2008

MM: But this is actually . . . almost . . . it's the draft first typed draft?

MO: First typed draft.

MM: OK, 'cause you've already drafted on paper?

MO: In my papers and then I look at this and write. So this is the paste-up of all my notebooks.

MM: OK, cutting.

MO: Drawings and cutting.

MM: I see, drawing lots of lines through paragraphs.

MO: Ja, and its funny, I mean some things just last and then I'll sort of put it into chapters and shuffle it around.

MM: OK, so deciding the chapters, that actually comes later, after deciding the plot, in a way?

MO: Ja so this was a draft that I'd done in Churchhaven when I was there in October. I tried to finish my book and it just wasn't ready.

MM: OK when do you get to this stage of binding it like that into a book?

MO: Oh, it's like one of my rituals; I just go and have it . . . I print it out.

MM: Why do you have it printed out – is it to make you feel it's now a book, or . . . ?

MO: It'So I print, ja, to make it feel like a book and not, I mean, to print a 300 page document. Then I would read through it. So I stick with the writing, handwriting, printing, back and forth and then, you know, I'll go and write detailed notes all the way through.

MM: Ja

MO: So I print it out my – treat it like a book – read it and then do the whole thing.

MM: So at this stage you're actually treating it as if it's already a book that you're now editing again?

MO: Yes.

MM: OK.

MO: And then I'll free-write again, bits that I've missed; that I've done wrong.

MM: OK, so back to your notebook.

MO: And then I'll do another draft which is here, and then –
MM: It's much thinner.

MO: I just printed it and then I do the same thing.

MM: But this time you printed it as a –

MO: As a book.

MM: Book with small pages. So you actually did it for yourself as if you . . . Did you do that on Publisher or was that Word? [software]

MO: Ja, and then I just go and fill in and then write by hand. Move the things that aren't . . .

MM: it must feel nice to you to now see it looking like its really on book pages [The first printed and bound draft is still in A4 format; the second is in A4 size pages but the typing has been arranged onto A5 pages so that the type size etc. looks like book pages.]

MO: Ja no no no, you get a feeling of stage that you can go through. So then I did an edit on this one which was trying to see where Clare was all the way though, it was the end of–

MM: OK, so you printed a whole think copy just to trace Clare?

MO: I did a re-edit. I did an edit in which I looked at the whole story from her point of view. And then I did another one from Riedwaan's point of view.

MM: OK, so you were actually tracking each character through the story making sure that they specifically stay consistent – just your main characters?

MO: Yes, and those couple of little peripheral characters as well. So I use this combined process – I'll edit the whole thing by hand and then rework, put in all my changes, and I make myself put in my changes as I mark them up rather than start editing them again.

MM: OK, so you go through, once you've gone through a book like this that you've printed, one of these books that you print out that looks like a book –

MO: Yes like this one.

MM: Then you go through and as soon as you've done the whole book you then go back to the computer and start typing again.

MO: I treat myself like a typist.

MM:  All your things again, OK, and then add those pages at the end?

MO: Yes and I stay ruthless and move things around – I just follow my own instructions. If it bugs me I make a note of it and when I print it out again, I –
MM: You look for it again do you? On those pages?

MO: You see some bits have lots more work than others.

MM: Ja, quite an intense editing then?

MO: Ja.

MM: Can I take some photos?

MO: Ja

MM: It's something I'm not sure my students get –'cause the editing process is the one that they don't understand, that you need to do this revision . . .

MO: Eish, so many times!

MM: That's a nice one there – because a lot of people, once its on typed pages, they're good.

MO: That's the thing, you think typing is good writing – it's just neat!

MM: Its just neat. They [students] don't do this nice messy…making a mess of it and then reworking it to make it work again

MO: Well, I do this to make it my own –

MM: Aha!

MO: If you know what I mean.

MM: Yes.

MO: To make it your own . . . . I mean the weird thing is because I can type so easily (I did a typing course) and its so convenient . . . but then you don't think and you don't feel and you don't . . . reading something on a screen is on another thing you can tell them is a very different experience. You asked me about the reader: I put myself in the position of . . . I become a reader and I read my own manuscript as a reader.

MM: As if it's a book.

MO: And you hold it in your hand and you read it over a day or two. That's why I just input my changes 'cause you've got this experiential time of reading a book and different things crop up compared to when you knit on the screen the track changes.

MM: Because you get kind of lost in the experience of writing . . .

MO: Totally.

MM: It's getting lost in the story and actually that's when the continuity glitches come in, 'cause while I was writing one bit it was hard for me to see the other bits sometimes . . .

MO: Yes. Ja, then you kind of get confused.

MM: OK, a few little fairly quick questions. Who's the first reader of – at what point in all of this do you invite anybody else in?

MO: Umm, I let people invite themselves in when they want to read the extracts, like my agent or my publisher. I know when it's finished. Like the last one I sent it off to my agent about a month ago, my agent and publisher. I knew it wasn't perfect but I knew it was time to let it go out. So it's usually when I feel that I can't see the wood from the tress anymore but it feels complete. I had thought it was gonna be complete one draft before and then I just realised it wasn't.

MM: who does it go to first, your agent or your publisher?

MO: Usually to my agent.

MM: OK.

MO: I went to my South African publisher at the same time because – just 'cause of timing and things.

MM: OK.

MO: But you know he's already bought the rights and everything, so it was . . . . And then he commented on it and my agent also commented on it.

MM: And is there then a back-and-forth process, and then . . . ?

MO: Ja, so they've given me their comments, now I'm sort of doing another draft really . . .

MM: How many drafts does it tend to go to through once the publishers start on it and the agent and . . .

MO: Guess I'll do this draft. I'm waiting till Isabelle sends me her marked up sheet – she worked on a marked up thing so I'll get all of her stuff. Um, Jeremy my publisher did as well; I'll probably put in all the suggestions and make the changes and then read it through and then do another version and send it back to them.

MM: So one or two versions?

MO: Ja I'm hoping after this  I mean the comments were interesting  it was like there were some plot discrepancies and there were places where it was a bit too long. So I'm hoping after this draft it will be able to go to the editor, then it's back and forth, but you can never get tired of that.

MM: You mustn't get tired or you don't?

MO: You can't.

MM: You can't. What do you do when you do get tired?

MO: I just get untired!

MM: You just get untired. OK.

MO: A lot of South African books are terrible because the published version is like a first draft.

MM: Hmm I feel that, yes.

MO: You know it's a first draft, there's no spelling mistakes really. . .

MM: It's like amateur.

MO: You think, OK, where's the novel in this?

MM: Hmm, it hasn't got sophisticated enough. I always feel that.

MO: No, and that you get just by working and reworking and reworking.

MM: I also always get the feeling that one or two characters are strong, but its those peripheral things and those details aren't fleshed out enough and you get that thinned feeling.

MO: Hmm no, exactly its not . . .

MM: Whereas yours were very –

MO: And the depth comes you have to work on it until it – I mean I'm not an – actually I have no problem letting it go when its ready and I have no problem with the critical response from my editor or agent or whatever. I like that, and from my other readers . . . . But if you give to somebody to read you must respond to their – if they're good readers, if you've selected your readers well, they come back to you with comments and what they say must be taken into account. You can't just say, 'I don't agree with you'; you must work out – you must be able to substantiate why . . . I'll give you a specific example: my publisher said to me that one particular thing was too much of a coincidence, and what it was it was an event right at the beginning and it was meant to tie up right at the end. So I thought well, I'll just take the coincidence out and I looked at it and I thought, No what I've done wrong, the wrong place, is not the coincidence at the beginning, its not pulling out what happened, if you know what I mean.

MM: Hmm, along the way.

MO: So he located the problem in chapter two, but the problem is because I haven't resolved it properly in chapter seventeen.

MM: So you put the hook in but you didn't reel it in . . .

MO: So you just think, 'Thank God he noticed.'

MM: Yes those things especially those little . . . in a detective story . . . . Humour as well , you plant little –

MO: Ja

MM: Bombs that have got to go off along the way otherwise you don't have the story. You've got lots of skills that have obviously become quite automatic now, like your cutting out your superfluous words and all those sorts of things. Where did you learn that? Did you obtain this skill along the way on your own? Are you sort of self-taught in terms of your writing skill, by modelling yourself from people you've read? Or did you ever have an editor somewhere early on who said to you . . . ? What?

MO: Um, I mean I love reading.

MM: Mm.

MO: And I studied. If you study literature you do . . . . I mean I had some amazing teachers. I had Coetzee. He was the most unbelievable person to be taught by 'cause he has such a precision with language and it kind of under . . . like a natural grasp of what language can do. And I hate, just as a person I hate, like frills and fluff and puff, I don't like it. So I think part of it with editing is, um, I do read and I see, I look at writing that I like and I work out how the writer made it like that.

MM: Mmm, so you actually have dissected writings that you've liked?

MO: Yes, and I do it all the time; I look at the writing and I think, how did this person make this work?

MM: Do you do that in the middle of your writing process?

MO: I can't read anything when I'm writing 'cause I hate all other writers with such venom.

MM: Jealous or just . . . ?
MO: I can't really – I just get overwhelmed by hatred and envy that they have got their book out!

MM: Ah!

MO: I can't even read the instructions on the shampoo bottle 'cause I think, 'This person wrote this down and they published it'!

MM: You're still in the process.

MO: Um, exactly. So its partly that I really know what kind of writing I like, I know how I want to write and I'm prepared to put enough – I'm prepared to put time in to getting there. I have worked with some very amazing other writers. I like working with other writers and seeing how they do their stuff but then I had the woman who re-edited *Like clockwork*, Lynda Gilfillan – she did Marlene Van Niekerk's. She's a very literary editor – it was fantastic working with her. Very experienced, very strict, hates adjectives and adverbs like a style-Nazi, which I love.

MM: Yes.

MO: You know 'cause you can say to an editor, 'This is how I want to write, this is how I want it to read, these are the things I don't like. If you spot them in my writing please let me know'. So anything purple or overwritten.

MM: So you actually tell the editor what style you're looking for, the editor doesn't impose herself.

MO: No it's a mutual thing and partly, if you work in film, it's a collaborative creative process and I like working with other people so I like that collaboration; so I learnt from making a film that you have a final product which is a tribute to the director but it's actually a composite of skills. So it's like using those different skills.

MM: Yes, so you get there . . . . She's got those sort of fine skills to help you with that.

MO: Ja, and they come to it fresh and they sort of take on all those. . . . Your editor is the person whose going to be more intimate with your writing than anybody.

MM: Hmm.

MO: You should love them – they're the only person who really cares what you say.

MM: Well apart from crazy fans in the post. You've got your family and you said that one reason you can't match .Alexander McCall Smith's daily output is because he has a wife
MO: Ja, but I've hired a wife now!

MM: Hired a wife. Because you hire wives. Good – excellent. And you'll just sit in your home, basically you neglect your family. What influence do your family have on your writing process? Obviously you have to take them into account.

MO: No no I do. You know, I pretend that I'm a man.
MM: OK.

MO: And I, um, well I don't . . . Not quite that I'm a man, but I've always believed in my own work and creativity and my writerhood and I don't feel guilty. I have no mother's guilt.

MM: OK.

MO: It just doesn't exist – it's never existed in my head and I have fantastically marvellous daughters who are high-functioning individuals who have suffered under benign neglect. So when I say I neglect them, I um . . . They're kept very safe, but they're very independent so they wash their stuff and they make food and they can fend for themselves and they make me food and all of those kinds of things. So I've never, I, fortunately, don't have that worry that many women seem to have of work or family – I support my family, I pay for them to go to school so I have to work. So in amongst that I do make – so when I say to them, 'OK, I'm going to work until the end of January and then I'm going to take off', then I do that and then we, I, take off time and hang out with them. I don't know how else to say it. But I mean, OK, they need to get from A to B so I did hire a wife. She shops for me and you know when I'm writing all the time. And my husband is like a co-parent, um . . . .

MM: You have a fully supportive husband who . . .

MO: Ja I do, but I think part of it, if you think of being a woman writer thing, it's like to believe in yourself. You know it's what I do.

MM: You don't see it as a hobby for a housewife

MO: No no no, it might well be, but it's how I earn my living and earning your living is . . . you have to, otherwise everyone goes hungry.

MM: Yes, no my mum's a full-time artist. Problem is sometimes convincing other people as a woman that doing something like this is . . .

MO: Ja.

MM: That this isn't . . . just that they can't just come and drop in for tea any time. It's actually your working day and others should treat it like an office.

MO: Ja I know exactly and I do . . . um, I *have* to work, I get unbearably anxious if I don't. It builds, its like I've swallowed a brick and I have to go and I have to go into my studio and then I'll calm down again.

MM: How old are your children now?

MO: Nearly twenty is the oldest one – Olivia and . . . sixteen and twelve.

MM: How old were they when you started your . . . my maths! – when you started your creative writer work?

MO: My first book?-

MM: Well, not your children's book.

MO: My first book . . . . It was a children's book, but I dealt with my editor's query; she phoned me from London and I was just on the way out to the hospital.

MM: Uh-huh.

MO: So I said to her, 'Look I'm in labour so just prioritise your questions! I think you've got three seconds and then I'm going have another contraction and then I'm going to go." So she went '123' so I said, 'That's cool, fine, fine' and I went and she was born!

MM: Yes, I finished my first book on maternity leave as well. It's possible cause it's the next three years that I found hardest to write after the baby was born and . . .

MO: Ja

MM: And they actually have to have the attention, I suppose.

MO: No they do, and I mean I didn't I always work, I mean this, like, mad obsessive writing I suppose I started in about 2001/2002, not – just the fiction [i.e. This is when she started writing fiction; she had been principally a journalist until this time.]

MM: OK, when your kids were at school?

MO: Ja

MM: Ja I know that's – I'm not planning to start before . . .

MO: My brain came back.

MM: Ah.

MO: That was the other feeling.

MM: Did your brain go funny in the . . .

MO: I only realised that it had gone funny when it came back.

MM: Was that the sort of the maternal instinct you got?

MO: I think it's that constant maternal vigilance that interferes with the creative process. Which you still have when your children are older, but it's more contained and you know what it is.

MM: Well you've also got to experience them being out in the world whereas when they're very, very little they're so very dependent.

MO: Ja, they are, they are, and they will die unless you pay them attention! So that maternal vigilance is quite something. I wanted to have another child when I realised that it's much easier to have a baby than to write a book. I had to channel that baby into a book.

MM: Three's fair enough.

MO: Ja no, three's good.

MM: You mention in one of your blogs – one little question that's very interesting for me; you talk about training through reading but just to be very clear: you mention quite a lot the influence of reading on your writing, but you don't really mention any particular training in writing. No writing teacher ever influenced you particularly?

MO: No, I've done some writing courses with a woman called Anne Schuster.

MM: I've heard of her

MO: In Muizenberg and Kalk Bay, and, um, I'm actually going to go and do a course with her in May as Sophie Brown, this artist's character, and it's a memoir writing course so I've got to write somebody else's memories which will be a nice challenge!

MM: Ah, I know someone called Romaine Hill who's actually an artist who's going to be there as well cause she works in those writing groups; she's also an editor actually. She's my husbands' fairy godmother.

MO: OK

MM: Another MacRobert – they're stalking you! Once the connection starts the web grows [This was a reference to a social chat we'd had earlier where it turned out by odd coincidence that Margie Orford knows my husband's uncle – also a MacRobert – really well.]

MO: I don't think you can really teach - like there's creative writing MAs so it will be quite fun. There are some people I think I would love to work with and have them as a mentor, but I think you learn, in fact you learn through doing, you learn through writing. I don't know what you would . . . I mean I love doing those courses with Anne, they're like four days and someone else says. OK do this, do that, and controls your energy and takes over control for me which is nice to give that up. But I haven't done any, I haven't done any creative writing courses apart form those with Anne which is just like a head space.

MM: And school – it sounded like they didn't do much for your reading?
MO: I probably did lots of writing at school. I mean I did very well in English at school. But, ja, like the normal, um, I mean it was always my ability.

MM: Yes

MO: It was my talent I mean the thing that I can do and the thing that I love.

MM: Do you generally find you're a language person, because you also work with images? So are you somebody who feels language is your most natural form of expression?

MO: You know it's telling stories and there are different media there; different stories ask for different media.

MM: So rather than language it's stories, specifically?

MO: Ja it's narrative and its how . . . to me, narrative – a story – is how we relate to, how we fit into the world, and it's like such a fundamental human thing and I learn languages quickly.

MM: Yes.

MO: I mean I love language.

MM: So you do have an aptitude for language . . .

MO: And an ear for stuff. Some stories need to be told in a photographs, some stories need a film, other stories need to be written in books, so it's not so much the medium; it's the – although I prefer books cause it's less stressful than making a film.

MM: It's obviously quite an important part of succeeding in a field like publishing and creative writing that you know a lot about a field and about publishing and so on. How did you get into that and how important is that in the –

MO: I really had a career strategy and I had a plan.

MM: Yes.

MO: With my plans, what I wanted to do. It's like if you want to be a judge you don't just become a judge – you study law and become an articled clerk and then become a lawyer and then, you know what I mean, you work and you have your aim and your goal. So I started working in publishing in Namibia with a woman - set up a publishing house for her books - so I worked a lot with writers as an editor, with creative writing and so . . . which is also valuable in working on how the stories come alive.

MM: Did you edit before you wrote yourself?

MO: Ja. But commissioning editing and editing a lot with people who'd returned from exile and had very traumatic experiences of the war; I mean my interest in violence and stuff I suppose is from that and surviving violence. So I was working with people often, people whose English wasn't their first language – their third or fourth language.

MM: So you'd commission them to write a story and then help them with the language?

MO: Yes. Or they would come with an autobiographical . . . or an autobiography or a sort of third-person autobiography looking like a novel – that type of thing. So I worked a lot with developing writers and I worked with the African Publishers Network and the Namibian Book Development Counsel. This is all in the nineties, so I've done a lot with how you develop a reading and writing culture and writing and schools and all of that type of stuff.

MM: Um, I wondered how you …

MO: When I was in Namibia we did lots of materials development. It really interests me, materials development and, um, teaching materials and teaching in poor schools and stuff. So writing textbooks was quite easy, you know what I mean, it's like . . . and I, um, how you make nice activities and how you bring things alive, it's like you do with a story really.

MM: Yes no, I've have done lots of . . .

MO: Ja

MM: Dorian Haarhoff was also at the Namibian university?

MO: That's right, that's right.

MM: When I was doing my textbook writing I did a lot of . . . because I often based an English activity on a story and –

MO: Ja

MM: You know, and sort of poems and rhymes as well.

MO: Ja.

MM: That's very . . . I've got . . .

MO: But you kind of learn your confidence through writing books that you're less vested in.

MM: Yes.

MO: 'Cause the rhythm of writing a book, whether its for *War and peace* or whether it's a reader for grade one is: beginning, middle, end, and you have to decide how you're going to do it and then do it and then finish it, you know what I mean? So you learn that pattern.
MM: Well two questions that will be interesting, considering what you've just said, are: If you were a mentor for young writers who are still in school and have got the whole world ahead of them in the sense that they might have the ability or they hope that they have the ability, what sort of advice would you . . . ?

MO: That they must read lots and try to work out why they read the things that they do and why they like them and why they don't like the other things. So you have to . . . you're not gonna get anywhere without reading. Then with writing: I was at the Durban writers' festival so I was talking to lots of children about just this. With writing then you know the classic thing of writing what you don't . . . and finding out what you don't know. Journalist writing – interviewing people, finding things out, telling stories that kind of fit into your domain, liking them, so that you practice. It's like doing scales for piano. Um, and you know the more, the more . . . and that you really need to write every day. You know what I mean? You keep journals or whatever; you need the practice of writing, writing, writing and then to work out if they want it as a career, to work on a strategy and then study the things that they need to do and then practice and write to be published for those free newspapers. Make a school newspaper – school children . . .

MM: So they build up a publisher's portfolio.

MO: [nods] Portfolio, so that you've got that.

MM: Does that help when you first go to a publisher, that you've got something?

MO: Ja, of course it does and then they think you're just some nut. Everyone wants to publish and then you say, 'But I have – I've published all of these things' – cause you only need to get one book published. Once you've got one thing published you will always be published if you produce material of a reasonable . . .

MM: You'll enter Alice in Wonderland!

MO: Ja you do. You do, you know, and it's just that initial breakthrough, so you build that portfolio and then you go!

MM: Excellent strategy. And then if you're someone who's worked with teachers quite a bit, if you've got language teachers and you're dealing with the writing process, what advice would you give them on what they should do or should not do, and just a red rag to a bull - things that teachers do that annoy you.

MO: Teachers think – you know those teachers that make children colour in the lines?

MM: you actually brought that up in *Blood rose* didn't you? And I thought, 'Aha!'

MO: I hate them! I hate them.

MM: I know. The constricting pattern.

MO: The same with writing: never make people colour in between the lines!

MM: And no formulas and recipes.

MO: No and I think what people would . . . If you're going to get things to write, what they need to access is something, some kind of authenticity and truth within themselves. I mean teenagers particularly are dreadful – sentimental – write rubbish. So you need to kind of get them through that . . . the writing, the reading, other people's writing helps.

MM: Authentic but not personal, necessarily?

MO: Ja, where you've got a genuine feeling.

MM: Hmm.

MO: And genuine observation. Teaching children how to observe, to go into a street and to watch people at a table and describe the interaction.

MM: Of other people, not just their own feelings, because I think teenage writing is often very autobiographical.

MO: Oh ja ja ja.

MM: It's *purely* autobiographical in fact.

MO: Ja, just get over it, so you make them go and observe other things and make a . . . you know, how closely are they sitting, how they drink their tea, what they talked maybe, so you get them to move from the imaginary, from the concrete. But also to give them the space to free-write and to do all of that unedited stuff and then teach them the phases – that just because you had a feeling doesn't mean it should be in public.

MM: Hmm.

MO: You know what I mean?

MM: Ja.

MO: And then how you process that . . . um . . . through writing which is not about spelling and about grammar. It's about form; I mean I love form and structure, so it's about those. Another way how you can do, um, teaching writing which I did cause I worked for those prisons that I worked with – in that maximum security prison. If you give them a form like a poetic form of certain repeats and stuff like that, so you get them to shape things within an existing form. So that you're not worrying about form and

content you just need to have – you've already got part of the rhythm is kind of there. So to work out the elements of writing – how you create pattern, how you create feeling, how you create sensation, and then build that up into a story.

MM: So the taking the raw material and working on expression?

MO: Ja.

MM: And working on form and structure . . . so those are the things you would really teach the discipline of before you get to the discipline of grammar and spelling and all those other . . .

MO: Ja grammar and spelling is . . . I mean, I always think the better the child's language that they're writing in, the easier it is to write. But then people, teachers, are so inclined to jump on things that are wrong instead of the parts that are effective in terms of creating a response, if you know what I mean. Yes grammar and spelling must be correct, but you need to respond to where the child has expressed something well, where they've caught an interaction between two people.

MM: Yes.

MO: Where they've managed to draw that space that exists between a boy and a girl and they get the space in between right or whatever. Teach them about point of view, where you're between them, so that you can smell the Chappies chewing gum and the deodorant; or you're watching them somewhere else – you know what I mean – get them to write about the one scene from many different places.

MM: So its use of language in a different way from just sort of . . . you know . . . the usual paragraph-structure topics - rather looking at effect for a while, and those things

MO: Ja.

MM: That's exactly – I want that on tape so that I can frame those words. That's fantastic. Well let me switch off now, we've reached the end. Thank you very much.

# Addendum E

## Transcription of the interview with Imraan Coovadia

**Date:** 20 April 2009

**Place:** Imraan Coovadia's home, Cape Town.

**Duration of interview:** 54:02

**Key:**
MM = Marguerite MacRobert
IC = Imraan Coovadia

[There is more text in the transcript before this point – including that his latest book was completed a year and a half ago but he is busy with other writing projects currently. Most of this conversation is not relevant, however].

MM: Well, could you try and summarise as far as you can what your perception of your writing process is from start to finish? If you could sort of outline it for me just by yourself before I start probing?

IC: It's kind of, you know, it's like sometimes when you're between books, you're kind of trying to find the right subjects, right? As well as the right angle, because they kind of go together. Sometimes you find the right subject, but you can't get the right angle, or right place to begin. So I sort of try out different things and sometimes I write stories, or essays, or whatever and then as kind of experiments and then sometimes and then I guess, I sort of tend to start something and then it's sort of, it's like, it's like Banzai trees. You know, it sort of like grows in this direction and then I trim it, or go back and then, you know, whatever, so it ends up being sort of, you know, I go forward this way and then I go back to a certain point and then go forward that way and try that out and if that doesn't seem to be working, I go back a bit. So it's sort of, you know, there's a kind of tree-like quality to it - the way it evolves and then and I often sort of go back over the same things until it's something, until there's some part of it that seemed right to me and then from that part, I sort of try and make the other parts feel right and once I have a draft, I then actually just go over it over and over again. I mean, I'll just work on, you know, each chapter in a row and often I'll just print it out and then type it all back and do that a couple of times. So it's very sort of recursive and you know, feeds back into itself in all sorts of ways.

MM: Do you teach Creative Writing as well?

IC: I do, ja.

MM: Yes, at UCT

IC: But untheoretically

MM: *Un*theoretically?

IC: Ja

MM: More in an intuitive..?

IC: Well, just, it's more like, I mean, it's more like you just give people a chance to write and then some chance to find out what they're up to, but we have a MA programme, so a lot of the people are

older and already writing and so it's just a chance to show their work to other people and have them respond in different ways.

MM: Yes, quite a famous programme. Is J.M. Coetzee still involved in that?

IC: John's moved to Australia, so ja -

MM: Because he is in Australia, is he not doing an extraordinary [professorship] thing?

IC: No.

MM: Not? Okay, so you're there. Now that's wonderful and your writing process: has it changed over time? Has it always had this two like structure for you - the intuitive growing, or has it, has it ever been different? Did you try any other approaches in the past?

IC: It's been much quicker. My intention used to be much better and I could pay attention. I mean, maybe it was the time, before e-mail and stuff, really, I could pay attention for a long period of time and it made sense to just write for four hours at a time and stuff and now it's more like one, or two hours, you know and I think, naturally you just, you don't have that kind of intensity all the time.

MM: OK, so the first bit felt quite intense, the process?

IC: Ja.

MM: Compared to now and you've written across a huge range of fields. I heard you did scriptwriting, what scripts did you write?

IC: Well, we did, we worked on a script for my ... I don't know if it will ever … and then I have another friend who's a documentary maker, vaguely working on the script for a second and then I'm so involved with and some filmmakers here and stuff - I'm just sort of trying to get *them* to do a movie. Probably about the taxi industry in Cape Town, because I think it's interesting.

MM: That would be very interesting, yes.

IC: Mm

MM: I notice the one point in the *Green-eyed thieves*, the narrator mentions, "Dear Scriptwriters" - he actually addresses the, and I thought that's a very interesting perception of audience, where he's writing to the future film maker

IC: Right.

MM: And seeing his life as a film, it was interesting. You've also done academic writing, a whole dossier and your novels and short stories, is there a big difference for you between writing, the process and you write academically, versus creatively?

IC: It's much easier to write academically. I mean, academically really, what you're doing is finding out something about the world and giving it, trying to figure out what its logic is and reporting it, you know – you're just, you're a sophisticated Reporter, really and so it has a much more straightforward relationship. Once you've found your subject and understood it and organised it, essentially, everything is done. The writing is just the cleanup process, whereas with Fiction Writing, the writing is the process.

MM: Is the process, okay. And now I'm going to look at some more specific little points. What motivated you to start writing a new book? Is it the same thing each time, a sort of an urge to write, or anything else?

IC: I don't know, I had a really odd career. I mean, you know, I wrote my first novel when I was like 22, 23. Nobody really liked it for about five years and then someone published it and then, so I thought I'd better write another one and then I wrote one, but it was a disaster and everybody hated it and then I wrote, *Green-eyed thieves* and that did okay. So then I - you know, I mean, sort of, I do think of myself as a writer, basically, but I guess, in-between books what, it's just more, I get nervous and I feel I should be doing something, you know.

MM: So you get this feeling you ought to write something else. To be a writer, or do you also write something else, because you want to write something?

IC: Both.

MM: Both, ja.

IC: I mean, I want to write. I want to be, it's like it is quite nice to be involved in writing something. It feels like any constructive thing, where you're kind of adding a brick to another brick and you know and I mean, I think everyone feels like, most people feel like that about their professions, you know.

MM: Yes, keeping going and do you start off with a particular audience in mind, or do you decide on the contents and styles and please yourself, really?

IC: I don't know, it's hard to say. It's more like, it's like, it's kind of like being a scientist sometimes. Like scientists always like, "Oh, where would it be interesting to get investigate?" you know, "where would it pay off?" and it's often like that. It's like what's the interesting material I have at my disposal, what would pay off in some ways and the pay-off, I don't know how to define it - it's not necessarily for an audience, it's not necessarily internal either. It's just some sense of what's fruitful.

MM: Something you want to probe - a topic, or a theme, or an issue

IC: Ja.

MM: That sort of gives you the kernel and what do you do to get those creative ideas going once you've decided, "I *am* going to write a book"? What do you do to generate your ideas to get the dream?

IC: Read a lot, talk to people. You know, write things, short things, poems, basically, just trial and error, you know, endless trial and error. You read the papers, you know, anything which gives you kind of constant input, is useful.

MM: Yes, do you try any of those "Right brain, left brain" sort of exercises and things, no?

IC: I don't think so, except maybe by default. I mean, often I listen to music and write and sometimes I don't. You know if something, if it's really going badly, I'll just stop for a while.

MM: You're in a writing programme as a Teacher, but do you also sometimes do workshopping with the students, with your own work?

IC: Never.

MM: No, okay.

IC: I just think it's a waste of their time and also, I'm just not that really interested in what anyone else has to say, you know. I mean, I think I might have been at some future, previous way, but I'm just not really interested nowadays.

MM: Okay, more interested in following your own sort of vision with the book?

IC: I guess, I don't mean that in a kind of whatever way. I just mean that I didn't kind of, you know, there's some kind of precision that you have internally that nobody else has, you know.

MM: Yes, your own sort of comforts, in a way.

IC: Ja.

MM: Ja and what's the most challenging, but for you finding an original idea, or coming up with a sort of overall plot idea, filling in details, which is the hardest bit?

IC: I think that most of it is, filling out an idea I don't know if that's hard. It's quite, in some ways if you train yourself to observe things and to collect things that are interesting, it's quite easy, it's natural, but it does take up most of the time. I think the hardest part is finding a really simple envelope for the whole thing, like the simplest possible structure, you know, that will then, while you are doing it, actually help you. So you know, what you want is the kind of form for your novel so that on, in the sixth month of writing on it, that form will give you a tip-off as to what to do on that particular day, or that week, you know, so I think I have real trouble finding that kind of simple form. Like if you look at Vikas Swarup's Q & A thing, it was like a really simple form. You know, it's just like a Quiz Show and then the chapters are organised around the individual questions, you know. So you want your form to be simple, but also not too mechanical.

MM: Mm. Because you're not writing in a particular [genre]. Margie's [Margie Orford] writing detective books.

IC: Ja.

MM: And she said she's got a very, you know, a form to fill and you've got to have, someone goes missing, or someone gets killed and in the end, the killer must be found

IC: Ja.

MM: And she says it's for her a matter of then

IC: Sure.

MM: getting from A to B, whereas for you, it must be a bit different.

IC: It *is* different.

MM: Ja and a lot of, there's a lot of detail in your novels, has it either been observed, or remembered, or you've researched it and somehow, I imagine, in terms of the detail, the train ride in India, the intricacies of diamond forgery – that was interesting. Do you, do you plan the research that you're going to do, or do you decide, "Well, I need to know more about general crime", or do you just see as you go along?

IC: It's sort of exciting to have a reading project along with doing something, you know, it's like, I mean, you know, ja, I'd read lots of books about crime and stuff, but it didn't feel like research. It was more that I was interested in it and I was writing about it, so

MM: Okay, so for example, if you're looking up things like the diamond certificates and so on, did you pick those details up, let's say, from films and general knowledge, or did you go and hunt for them?

IC: Often, like specific books, I mean and often, you're just reading a book and luckily, it will have something in it. That was, there was some guy who was writing a lot about De Beers and diamonds and that was, it was a very interesting book. I can't remember which one.

MM: Yes, was it round about the time of that film, *Blood Diamond*, or anything like that?

IC: I think people were thinking about diamonds then, ja.

MM: So it will be scraps that you pick up from fiction or non-fiction and general reading?

IC: Ja.

MM: Okay and then, obviously, after the book's been published, everyone starts drawing comparisons between you and your narrators and their families and they start seeing you as the grandson of Khateja and you know, or you as perhaps part of a family in *Green-Eyed Thieves*

IC: Ja.

MM: Does using autobiographical type material, does it ever interfere with the writing, or cause you problems where you've got to cover your trail a little bit to make a good writing, or?

IC: Ja, you have to. I mean, because a lot of your experience is your *own* experience, you know, but it's like, it's always scrambled. I mean, you know, you'll take a bit from here, or a piece from there, or they'll use a character and then alter it in some way. So I mean, everything has to fit inside the book. In terms of like worrying about people, ja, I mean, actually, this book really worries me because there are lots of people who could think that they are the characters, but they're not really. They're just, there's some of the germs the characters came from particularly.

MM: Okay and *The wedding*, was that, that was one of your first?

IC: Ja.

MM: That was your first novel, was it?

IC: Ja.

MM: Was that more autobiographical than your later books?

IC: Not *really*.

MM: Not really? Just it was a made out story, really?

IC: Pretty much, ja.

MM: Okay, because a lot of people slip between saying, the narrator and the author when they're writing reviews

IC: Ja.

MM: And I think that temptation to make the narrator you, is quite difficult, perhaps for the author to sometimes cover (soft laugh) and then, in the *Green-eyed thieves*, your narrator poses a little question. He says, "Does literature not come at things at an angle rather than head on?" and I thought, both *Green-eyed thieves* and *The wedding* have got unique writing styles and you break lots of style guide rules, because of the idiom, I think, you want to create. Do you have any goals when it comes to your writing style, when you set out for a book, do you say, "I want to get this kind of style", or "I want to capture that", how do you set out with any intention?

IC: Ja, I don't know. It's always like, whatever like the most advanced, like however I think language should be, ja, at a particular time and then like I get tired of that and then and so it's often like books I'm reading which I think are like the most interesting novels, so I'm interested in language that sort of, that has the same sort of intensity of some kind, or another, or control. I mean, ja, no, I mean, I think style I think, is like that minute, you know, it's like that's the decision you make all the time and what, how does this, how is the sentence going to fit together, or whatever. I mean, that's the sort of the key of the whole thing.

MM: Because, in *The wedding*, you use a very specific style - do you set out, did you set out, saying, "I really want to capture that in English idiom and the speed of talking and the?"

IC: Ja, it was more that once I began writing it, it just turned out to be a really fruitful and interesting thing to explore.

MM: To do, so it happened after the book started, in a way, rather than before?

IC: Ja.

MM: And I've noticed your e-mails, because you said your emails change .., you've got a remarkably different writing style. They're very concise, very sort of … Do you have different writing personas that you put on for different writing jobs?

IC: I don't know. An email seems to me, it's just best to be efficient, you know, and direct. Ja, I guess, you know, I guess every little mini job has its own generic rules.

MM: That you go for and your books are sold widely in a number of countries. You've written from the United States, as well as South Africa. Do you have any picture in your mind at all of who your audience are when you start writing?

IC: No idea.

MM: So are you your, are you your own audience?

IC: That would just seem stupid, though, wouldn't it?

MM: Ja, but is there someone you know as well? Do you picture anyone that you're writing to, or do you write just for yourself?

IC: No, particular picture and any particular person. Maybe like a future person, like a person .. to buy your book, or something.

MM: So you imagine the influence the book might have on people?

IC: I guess I could. I'm not really sure. I mean, I just don't really have a good answer for that question.

MM: That's an answer in itself, which is fine and that is, answers that one as well and you're a Teacher of Literature. I've said that before, but how does that influence, when you write, do you ever write perhaps from that position as a literary person? Are you sort of creating literature, rather than? I mean, I know Margie is obviously writing a more popular

IC: Ja.

MM: Do you aim more for literary type writing that's easy to classify?

IC: Ja - I don't know, it's hard to say. I think it probably would be fatal if I was. I mean, it would be instantly fatal. You know, I think it's the reason that most academics can't write fiction, but I mean, it doesn't mean that I get caught, I get a chance to look, to think through things when I'm teaching them, or talking about them, but I don't know, I don't know, I mean, there isn't quite a simple separation, because there is a process of like analysis and that is useful, actually as a writer, as well as an academic, you know and there's a process of kind of seeing which books survive, like you know, I'll read, if I love a book, I'll read it over and over and over again and only very few books survive that. And so lot of the time when I'm writing, there's like a mini canon of things I'm really interested in when I'm writing them and there'll be sometimes often things I teach, but I'm also reading a lot, like when I was doing this, it was like, I was really, I was sort of reading Lear over and over again and Tolstoy and

MM: For, just for the recording, you were writing *High, low, in-between*?

IC: Ja.

MM: Okay.

IC: And when I was writing, *Green-eyed thieves* I guess, I was reading a lot of, reading *Lolita* and Stockholm Syndrome and sort of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Emerson.

MM: That's interesting. Someone who wrote a review, said that, in the *Green-eyed thieves*, it's like *Lolita*, you walk with the criminal. So even though, even though you might condemn what they do, you actually can't help liking them

IC: Sure.

MM: And sympathizing, to a certain extent.

IC: Ja.

MM: So you, you sort of, you've got companions while you work in a way, by reading those books over and over and your books are full - they, obviously, they're humorous, or ironic. They're full of questions of identity. You've got racial segregation, morals, the family. How do you decide what issues you'd like to write about and how you integrate the issues with the entertainment side of writing? How do you work that?

IC: I don’t know. Sometimes -

MM: Do you, does it ever bother you, or do you think about it at all, really, or does it just happen?

IC: It just sort of happens, but it can't -, I don't know, I mean, I guess, characters think about things, think about issues, so I guess, it must just happen. Sometimes I'll choose like a character, because I'm interested in some particular issue and the character is like a way into the issue, but usually not. I mean, but I'm saying that, but then I, it's sort of untrue. I mean, I was sort of interested in like Islam as a subject and like there's different sides of it when I wanted to write, *Green-eyed thieves*, or something. So there were, the characters were, *were* sort of the issue. You know, they were a way posing like an issue, but then the moment you create them, they sort of, they change the issue and the issue kind of bends around them and becomes less defining, you know, it sort of becomes more elusive.

MM: So enjoying the story a bit and the issues fade, or?

IC: Sure, or even the way, I mean, because it's writing rather than philosophy. Like it's the way they're posed and then what happens once an issue is posed and how it's written about and it sort of, it just makes it a more interesting thing than a kind of direct statement, or a direct analysis, you know.

MM: Yes, no, absolutely and just looking at planning before writing a little bit. One reviewer said that the ideas in your book, but also the structure of your books, is subversive. He said that you circle around a chaotic list of events, or descriptions and then you tie up the narrative. When you plan your book structure, you said you have trouble finding that envelope, so do you ever storyboard, or map it out, or draw a picture, or anything before you begin?

IC: I occasionally try those kinds of tricks, but they don't work for me, you know. Like what works for me sometimes is just like as I'm writing, thoughts will occur to me, so I'll add little notes on the bottom of a Microsoft Word document and then come back to them, or I'll have like, you know, like a document open which is separate from the, from actual writing, which has little ideas and stuff, but usually, it doesn't work. Usually, it's really sequential. It's like, you know, this bit and this bit and this bit and then go back and change it, whatever, you know, but it's not like I have some clear, very clear picture of what's .., so

MM: Okay, so you don't sort of draw yourself a tree and then trim it. You actually let the tree grow more organically and before you start writing, how much actual planning of structure do you do, if any? None at all, or?

IC: I have some vague ideas and they never really work out.

MM: Okay, they never turn out the way you -

IC: No.

MM: - you started with, and the planning that you do, do you write notes? Do you set to try something?

IC: No, I take notes. I sometimes read books. I mean, I sometimes read - whatever - books about some particular subject. Often, it's -

MM: And then do you keep that in any organised fashion anywhere, or is it just a file, or?

IC: Not really. Usually not. Um, ja, what else do I do? Nothing much. You sort of, the real thing is like while you're actually writing, you want things to occur to you, you know, like on, in that particular hour or two that you're writing, if you've been reading a lot about something, like the writing will often occur to you, or if it doesn't occur to you, then you go back and then when you come back, it will occur to you.

MM: And while you're doing your planning, is there anybody else at all you work with, a previous publisher, an agent, a friend?

IC: I have an agent, I have a publisher I have friends, but they don't really help me.

MM: They don't participate in the writing process much?

IC: No.

MM: Okay and - you answered that one. Good. Do the characters surprise you quite often then by doing things you hadn't expected? Do they sort of take over from you as the author? Do you ever get that feeling that the puppets are running away from the string?

IC: Less so now. But I mean, as they have like integrity as characters, there are certain things that they do that makes sense. You don't know beforehand and if you try to come up with the thing that they do, or think, or say, or their style that makes sense. So it's sort of more like, I don't know. Maybe

it's like painting a picture, or something. You know, you paint one stroke and you try another one and that one fits, you know. So I guess, that's a sort of surprise.

MM: So you say there are less surprises now. Do you mean, in the most recent books?

IC: Ja

MM: So in your first books, did you find there were more surprises than now? Do you think that's because you've got more control over the writing process, or because you've got a stronger idea of what you're writing?

IC: I don't know, or maybe it's just you get used to the kind of discoveries, the kind of small discoveries you make in writing all the time and they just become part of your everyday apparatus.

MM: So the surprises become less surprising, in a way?

IC: Ja.

MM: Okay and there was one children's writer who said she was writing a story and then a group of elves showed up and she said, "Sorry, there were no elves in this story" and they said, "But we're here now" and it would be interesting to think of elves in Fordsberg, or something like that - has that sort of feeling ever happened to you, that characters arise that you hadn't wanted, or hadn't planned for and then they feel, it feels like they're imperative?

IC: Sure, or senses, or ideas. Yes. No, I mean, I think that's what writing is, is some kind of constant discovery, or…

MM: Okay, well, that's good and I read somewhere, I don't know where they got this information - I tried to find the original source - that you followed your mother and aunt around with a notebook for months to try and get the cadence of their speech, which you really got in *The wedding*. I laughed myself silly, and did you do this while you were writing the book, or before you started writing the book?

IC: While.

MM: While you were writing, okay.

C: While, well, there's .., I didn't think anyone had really gotten sort of Indian dialect in English very well, so I did that and then I also just looked through novels, some of Nabokov's novels, some of Rushdie's, even some older Indian novels and I sort of wrote down what I found there as well.

MM: Okay, so you looked at other Indian writers, specifically, because I know, what writers have done is they've often gone into caricature, really. It's been rather crude

IC: Mm

MM: Whereas that really did get that marvelous sort of ongoing chatter of the women and so on and, is a lot of language itself important to inspire you to get writing and as you play around with wordplay sometimes, or does the word itself inspire you a writing session?

IC: Sure. I don't think I really *love* language as such. I mean, I have friends who are poets who kind of care about the language. I mean, it's not really the language. I mean, there are effects in the language which are interesting and style is great and thoughts, but language as such, I'm not sure I love, you know.

MM: So you don't in essence get like a word that makes you go, "Oo, must write around that"?

IC: Sometimes, but it's more often a combination of words, or a perception that you're trying to find the right vehicle for.

MM: Okay, so words as vehicle. I read that you like your computer because it has an infinite supply of blank pages. Do you write on paper first at all?

IC: No.

MM: Straight onto the computer?

IC: Straight on the computer.

MM: Laptop, or desktop?

IC: Desktop.

MM: Desktop. Why do you use a desktop?

IC: I think because it fits into like a routine. It's like on a table and I just sit there. I mean, I have a laptop, but like, you know, just, it's nice to just have the same thing that you do all the time.

MM: Nice and solid and you use Word, you said, as well? Do you use track changes, or those things?

IC: No.

MM: Just the footnotes

IC: Just -

MM: at the bottom. Okay and you never ever write longhand?

IC: Never.

MM: Not, OK. Interesting and are you a fast typer, in that case? Do you type quite fast?

IC: Ja

MM: Do you and sort of fluently?

IC: Mm

MM: Is that important for your writing, do you think?

IC: Not really. I mean, no one can write as fast as they can type. I certainly can't.

MM: Mm-mm. Okay.

IC: You know, I mean, I don't know, maybe I write 200 words for a good day, but anyone can type, you know, like 200 words in an hour.

MM: Does it help your, the flow, that you can type quickly? Do think it would hamper you if you were a slower writer?

IC: I don't think so, but it does seem like a lot of the kind of - like I think, I don't find writing as such, hard, because it, I don't feel like my mind is always engaged. It almost seems like it sort of happens in

your fingers a lot of the time. You know, it's not like a conscious searching a lot of the time. Well, not all the time, so it's, that's why it's sort of possible for me, I think. I think if I had to actually concentrate all the time, had to really be conscious, it would be very, very hard.

MM: So do you feel you write from a slightly more subconscious space, in a way?

IC: It feels that way, but then when I think about talking, I don't know what I'm going to say before I say it, you know , say it's sort of the same kind of like, you know, unconscious, or hidden source.

MM: Do you know about Csikszentmihalyi and your higher sense of flow, he says it's that sense of being detached from reality and merging with the moment. Do you get that sort of a feeling when you write?

IC: Absolutely, ja.

MM: Can you describe the feeling a little bit?

IC: It's a blankness.

MM: A blankness.

IC: It's a blankness and then just kind of, I don't know, I mean, it's a lot like my advisor in grad school, loved woodwork and I never understood it until I had to do something and then it's, it's a lot like that sometimes and like you sand something down and you paint it, or whatever. You know, there's just like lots of little activities and then you do and you can do them all reasonably well, because they're quite simple. So it feels a lot like that.

MM: You get a kind of, a calm excited sort of stage?

IC: Mm

MM: Okay and how is your spelling ability?

IC: It's good.

MM: Is it good? And your grammar?

IC: I think it's fine, but people sometimes tell me I use "off-" whatever, "off-standard" grammar sometimes.

MM: Off-standard. Do you think that's from the culture of that kind of Indian English that you hear more?

IC: I don't know, I'm not sure.

MM: Which standard is what I was wanting to know?

IC: Oh, I'm not sure if there's a consistent violation of it. Ja, sometimes I guess, I don't really care too much about the modes of subjunctives, or

MM: Okay, so and do you think that, that's important in your writing, that you're a good speller and you're good at grammar and those things, or do you not pay much attention to them while you write?

IC: I don't think I pay any attention at all.

MM: At all? So it's fairly automated for you?

IC: Ja.

MM: You don't have to check. So when you get to work on your computer and you start, you're writing all your bits and your tree is going now, how do you organise the material as you go along? Do you work in chapters? Do you

IC: Paragraphs.

MM: In paragraphs?

IC: Ja and sentences.

MM: Okay and do you move the paragraphs around a lot?

IC: Almost never. Ja.

MM: So do you write sort of chronologically from start to finish as a book and then you

IC: I try.

MM: You try, okay.

IC: But often it will be chronological, you know, I'll go forward and then I'll go back to some point where it just seems wrong and then delete it and

MM: Okay, so you then you have to then change, I imagine, the ripple effects of that. How do you get a sense that you're on track, everything is going well? Is that through the reading of the drafts, or just an instinct?

IC: I don't know. I think it's like the same way, you know, like if sometimes you're playing like tennis and it's going well, it's like a feeling that you're doing you want to do.

MM: That flow thing, perhaps. Okay. Do you spend most of the time writing, or do you spend most of your time, if you, how long do you take for a book? About six months you said, or?

IC: No, four years.

MM: Four years, OK. If you sort of vaguely thought about that time, would you say you spent most of the time writing the original material, or organising the material and linking it together, or checking for spelling and mistakes, which, what takes up most of your time?

IC: I'd say, 80 % of the time is revising. I have a draft and then revising it, so that it's right.

MM: Okay, alright. That's interesting and then how do you, what do you do, if everything is going badly and you feel, you know, "Today is horrible, I'm not expressing myself well" - do you stop? Do you go on?

IC: I usually just go on, but if it gets really bad, then I stop. Then I usually stop writing that book, you know. Or I start somewhere else, ja.

MM: Start at another point in the story?

IC: Ja.

MM: Or start…?

IC: Ja, it depends. I mean, there are, there are lots of kind of novel projects I've tried out and given up, especially over the last year, year-and-a-half. So and then, so when that feeling of discouragement comes, like it's fine for a day or two, but if it goes on for a while. You just, I think it's like a sign telling you that something is not -

MM: That book's not working.

IC: Ja.

MM: What would bother you most? Sort of poor sentence structure, or poor word choice, or poor spelling, if you were looking at one of your drafts? What would irritate you?

IC: Probably poor word choice.

MM: The word choice more than the structure?

IC: The sentence structure as well, yes.

MM: As well, okay, but spelling?

IC: But not in, no, not in a grammatical sense. More just like you want sentences that are kind of crisp and interesting.

MM: Mm. And what do you tend to fix first, if you spot on the screen in front of you, a spelling mistake, a sentence, a word choice, what would you correct on the spot?

IC: I mean, spelling is automatic. I don't, I can't remember making a spelling mistake. I mean, often it will just be like things like deleting or adding in articles and definite articles, you know and say well, 'a', or just seeing that a sentence doesn't seem, feel kind of right, it doesn't have the right tension, or whatever.

MM: Okay and then, you said you work in terms of drafts. About how many did you go through?

IC: Actually, really dozens.

MM: Dozens and dozens?

IC: Dozens and dozens, ja.

MM: And how do, how do your drafts look? Do you print them out and bind them and say, "Let's take a break and then work through it, with you on the screen?"

IC: No, sometimes I do it on the screen, sometimes I print it out and then type it.

MM: And then type it.

IC: Print it out and then zero in on what I think needs

MM: Okay, do you scribble it on the printed page, or do you work straight onto the screen again?

IC: Sometimes, I scribble on a page, sometimes, but not often

MM: Okay, not much? Okay.

IC: I'm like an extremist, you know.

MM: Could you show me a draft just now?

IC: I don't think I have one.

MM: You don't have one? Do you throw them all away when you're finished?

IC: Ja.

MM: Okay, you're not a hoarder like Margie. And do you tend - if a section isn't working, you said you work in paragraphs, if a paragraph isn't working - that particular paragraph, are you likely to bin it and start completely again, or are you more likely to rework what you've got later? Leave it for now and come back later?

IC: I'm much more likely to kind of use it as a starting place for getting it right.

MM: Okay, so you use it as an inspirational point and no other time. Do you take a break when you get to that point when you think, "A horrible paragraph"? Do you, do you take a break then, or do you work on something else first, or did you carry on hammering about the paragraph?

IC: It's hard to say now, because, you know, there's my computer and then there's like email in the background and you know, whatever, your Internet browser and I-tunes and stuff, so it's like that sort of mechanism of like taking breaks, is just part of the whole thing and I don't know why I do it when, why I decide to

MM: But you do take breaks in-between every now and then?

IC: Ja, like every five minutes.

MM: Just a few minutes. Okay, why do you specifically take breaks? Is it a sense of frustration? Tiredness, boredom?

IC: No, no, it actually just works kind of nicely into the whole thing. You know, it's like I'll get to the middle of a page and I'll think, "Okay, well, I don't know" and do something else a few minutes.

MM: Do something else for a bit, okay. Do you ever get a feeling of kind of, like some people say, the engine's overheating, that you're getting too intense on a project and you need to step back from it? No, not really?

IC: No, I really like that. I mean, when I was finishing this, writing, like revising like 12 hours a day, like three months, or four months and it was good.

MM: You like that intensity?

IC: Ja.

MM: Do you get a feeling of let-down when you finish a book?

IC: I'm always promising myself that I'm going to be really happy when a book is over. It's never quite true.

MM: Do you miss it, or you? Or is it just an emptiness after the project?

IC: I don't know what it is. I think it's very specific. I mean, it hasn't happened that many times, so I don't have an account of what happens. But it's really hard if you're a writer, not to be writing

something. It's long. I mean, it's easy, like I write lots of short things, essays and stuff, but it's hard not to have that project.

MM: Mm. The bigger project, the novel, because you also write short stories. How long do they take? Your *Composition IV*, how long, because you said you are very proud of that, how long do that?

IC: That is the easiest thing I ever wrote, it took about five days.

MM: Five days, really?

IC: But sometimes life if there was a story I was working on for like, you know, I wrote a draft of it in three weeks and then I wrote another draft and another draft and it still isn't right. I mean, it may never be right, you know.

MM: (Mm, mm) But you're keeping on with it. Is it a thing you like?

IC: Whatever, it's on my computer. I haven't looked at it in a year, but then there are other stories that take maybe two or three weeks, or so.

MM: Okay and the composition aids, did you write that for a competition for a journal just because you felt you had to write something with that, just a

IC: I finished the novel and I was just, I guess I was trying to figure out what I wanted to write next, so I thought I'd write some stories and I hadn't written any before then.

MM: Do you have a copy of it? I haven't found one.

IC: I'll e-mail you a copy.

MM: Please, just your *Three Penny Review* is very prestigious, but I don't have a subscription. So

IC: Remind me and I have a Word document

MM: I'll e-mail you, thanks. And there we go - you mentioned in the interview, you write in the mornings, you said about four hours? How long do you sit at your desk?

IC: It used to be. Now it's more like two.

MM: Okay, now two?

IC: Mm.

MM: Okay and do you, do you get up from your desk at all? You say, you take breaks on the computer and then emails. Do you get up as well sometimes and walk around?

IC: Yes, I make tea.

MM: Ja, do a few other things as well.

IC: Mm.

MM: Okay and what sort of tells you, you need a break, if you need to make a cup of tea now?

IC: A random feeling.

MM: A random feeling, okay. In the wording, you've got very interesting punctuation challenges, when, especially when Katija has her internal sort of ranting, it's almost a stream of consciousness at times and at other times, you use significant capital letters, a bit like A.A. Milne and Winnie the Pooh, you've got, you know, I think, what did I write here? "Two Kicks on the Backside" and "the Last Straw" [phrases from *The wedding*]. How do you decide on your own internal writing rules for punctuation that isn't standard punctuation?

IC: Ja.

MM: Is there, you do seem to be consistent so that the reader, you know, in the beginning it's a little tricky to get into.

IC: Ja.

MM: How do you decide on your own? Do you write your own style, kind of?

IC: I honestly can't remember at all. I mean, now it is completely standard punctuation I mean, complete standard punctuation.

MM: But that book, did you decide to be consistent at any point?

IC: I don't know, I honestly, this is last - I mean, I wrote it in '92, '93.

MM: So it's too long ago to remember?

IC: Mm.

MM: It does seem you had some consistency.

IC: Mm.

MM: There we go. When you do correct your spelling and punctuation? Do you do that right at the end of your draft?

IC: No, I don't. It's part of like writing.

MM: It's part of the writing process for you?

IC: Ja.

MM: Because you said, sorry, I know there are lots of questions on that, but it's something teachers struggle with -

IC: I tend to standardise later. I mean, I tend to, it tends to be much more irregular. I think, *The wedding* was much more irregular when I wrote it and then I started standardising it somewhat, but I can't remember much more than that.

MM: Your publishers and editors and so on, what influence do they have on the product? At some point, I presume, the editor starts making comments and dealing with the work. How much influence does that have?

IC: Very little and I went out of my way on this book, at least and on the previous one, just to choose an editor who wouldn't interfere.

MM: Wouldn't interfere, so you don't like the interference very much?

IC: I just don't know what to do with it, really. By the time I give a book to somebody, I mean, I've been working on it for three or four years and it's just, it has a kind of like, it's like permanence, you know. It's sort of just, it's glued sharp in my mind and it's really hard for me to open that again. So like often they'll nudge me in some direction, like they'll say, "Well, this isn't clear", or whatever, so I'll add in a paragraph, or a scene, or whatever, but it's very minimal.

MM: Okay, so you try to hand them over a book. This is as finished as possible and [you want to] get as little input as possible, okay.

IC: Well, I'm interested to see what someone says. I just find it hard to respond.

MM: Mm, mm. Because that book's finished for you? OK and who's the very first person who reads your books when you're finished? Do you have a friend, or a colleague?

IC: I've got Isabel Dixon, my agent.

MM: Your agent is the first person, OK. What do you do if you need help; you're panicking about the style of the book? Do you go to old authors, friends, writing style guides, dictionaries?

IC: No, I mean, I'll read.

MM: OK, you'll read again and what do you do if you get the dreaded writer's block, but you are still committed to the book, because you said, you give up on some books? Let's say you were, you know, you believe in the book, but you really can't seem to write?

IC: I don't know that you can get writers' block two-thirds of the way through a book. I mean, I don't know when writers block happens, but I think it happens *before* you begin a book, or when you're in the first 30 pages, or something. I don't think it happens -

MM: Haven't you had it? Apparently, it does

IC: Is it?

MM: Yes, you get people who can't finish a book.

IC: I think in that case, it's something - the book as a project is ill-conceived, you know and I think I have written, I did try to write a book that just ran out, I guess, halfway, but it was because the book was a disaster.

MM: OK, so you think it's part of the earlier process?

IC: Mm.

MM: Alright, so what's the skill that you think you've mastered, that gives you the, sort of a writing edge? What do you think is your most important skill with words, or with story, or?

IC: I don't know, I think for myself, I try to.

MM: So an independent mind.

IC: I'm not sure. I think I'm surprised by how indirect people are, like how, how little it matters to most writers, or most people around me till I get to the point, or a point of some kind and I think I just, I really feel very strongly about that, which is weird, because I feel like I'm quite an indirect person, intrinsically and an indirect writer, but it's the lack - I think it's slight, I think there's some sort of hatred or fuzziness, vagueness and unnecessary indirectness, which are probably a kind of character logical things.

MM: Because your stories actually are quite indirect in a way. I mean, hard to pin them down, because they are so complex

IC: Okay

MM: But, so is it a sort of, are you looking for a position of description, or a position of characterization, or?

IC: I don't know, I don't know

MM: Kind of a mood, or

IC: I'm not sure. I mean, I just, it's really hard to say, like what one thing is. Sometimes it's just, I mean, especially with South African fiction, you just get the feeling that people are just kind of using words that they borrowed from other books, or whatever and there is just no feeling of, not even reality, but just the thoughts aren't very interesting thoughts, the sensations aren't very interesting sensations, the characters are just sort of not really characters, you know, they're just names. So it's just the sense of, I don't know, maybe fullness that's not there, which I, which I sort of want, I think.

MM: And sort of, you're like George Eliot, well, you write about George Eliot a bit and that. Are you looking for that social depth in a way and complexity?

IC: Sometimes it's very hard to write a socially complex novel about South Africa, because it's such a weird society and so, it's difficult to structure a plot around South African society in an Eliot type way, but yes, I mean, Eliot's psychological complexity, I just don't see characters in South African fiction with any real - I mean, they have an interesting situation sometimes, but actually, the .. have interesting feelings, or thoughts, or whatever, sensations, not very often, sometimes.

MM: Mm. Do you think that placing your book in such a strong cultural sort of location, do you think that helps a bit?

IC: It makes it a lot easier for me, ja

MM: Giving a bit of precision. So you're not trying to write a sort of everyman type book. You're more trying to write a specific story?

IC: Ja, well, it depends. Like this book I just finished, I was sort of thinking about what would a kind of general South African - what would a kind of representative South African character be like. Not in the sense of economically representative, but kind of spiritually representative, you know.

MM: Mm. Because you do actually mention in *Green-eyed thieves*, you know, the South African Calvinism and you, you every now and then step out so across the board and kind of unite all the races under certain labels

IC: Right.

MM: which actually do ring very true as well.

IC: Ja.

MM: Ja, in a sense of, so is that what you? Hang on, I have to read this, it's terrible [trying to follow where I am on my interview schedule]. With that skill, do you think it's a part of who you are? Do you think you've learnt it along the way somehow from your reading, or from a teacher?

IC: Look, there's definitely like an element of like just, if you do something for 10 or 15 years, you just develop certain habits and whatever

MM: OK, so it's partly, you know, from practice and do you think, these skills now, do you think they've been automated a bit, or was the first book a bit harder to write?

IC: Highly automated. Ja, which is both a virtue and like a terrible deficiency, you know. When things are automatic, you can't really change them and it means it gives like, I think, writers tend to become less original, because they - unless and writing seems somewhat, can be less alive, you know.

MM: And with your writing skills, did you ever have a teacher or a publisher, or an editor who taught you something you didn't know, or did you develop it all through doing? Did you learn by doing as the expression goes, or did you ever have someone who gave you really good advice, or?

IC: It's a weird mixture. It's like the kind of nature culture thing, you know. It's like, in some ways, 90 %, or 95% is learning by doing and changing, but then there are those like really essential, like weird things that someone will tell you, like little, just thoughts that they'll tell you and will sort of send you off in some totally different direction, you know and often it's, you know, those things, you have to sort of listen for them and they do happen and -

MM: Is it particular teachers, or people, or has it been through reading, or how did you come across those things?

IC: Often, I mean, those kinds of things more often come to you through people

MM: Through people

IC: Teachers, or friends, or whatever, just random.

MM: Is there a person you can think of as an example?

IC: Many, I mean, just in like the simplest way, like in a kind of family way - my father is the first person who read those sort of first texts of *The wedding*, or looked at the chapter and he just said, "Look, you know, there's no dialogue in it" and he said, "You know, it's so nice when you're reading a book, there's dialogue because you just feel like you look at a page with dialogue, it just feels easier to look at than a page without dialogue. So, you know.

MM: Did you go back over the whole draft and put all the dialogue in then?

IC: Well, I had a chapter; I think I had a chapter.

MM: Oh, was there a chapter?

IC: Ja, yes

MM: Because I was going to say, it's hard to imagine *The wedding* without dialogue.

IC: Ja, ja, so then I started, so I mean, just that kind of thing, often it's just like the simplest thing that someone will tell you.

MM: Okay, your father is a doctor, a medical person?

IC: Mm

MM: Okay and so, it was actually just a comment from him as another reader in a way and because you, you were also at Harvard and those places. Did you ever enter into their writing programmes, or anything?

IC: Ja, I mean, I took a, actually, I took a credit course with Coetzee when I was there

MM: Did you?

IC: Ja

MM: Oh, you're one of the Coetzee acolytes as well?

IC: I don't know if I'm an acolyte, I mean

MM: A student writer?

IC: Sort of, ja

MM: Yes, did you do the MFA with, or

IC: No, no, just, I just did an undergrad course with him. But he wasn't, I mean, he was nice. He wasn't very engaged as a teacher, you know and for whatever reason, I don't think I'm very engaged as a teacher. It just doesn't. I mean, I have good students, I'm interested in what they write to some extent, but it's not like the centre of my life. You know, I know a lot of other people are really intense and involved in their teaching and it's psychologically crucial. It just isn't for me. You know, so while I'd like people to do well, I'm not going to like beat my head against the wall to make sure that everyone's a good writer you know and I think John is the same way.

MM: Did he teach you writing as such? Oh, so you did a writing course with him. What was the most important thing he taught you?

IC: He said, "Write four hours a day"

MM: Write for?

IC: Write for four hours a day. He said that's what he did in the mornings. That's about the most important thing you can tell anybody.

MM: Yes, that you must write steadily and often - is that the idea?

IC: Early in the morning and for like a quantity of time, yes.

MM: Okay and you are a lecturer at UCT, is it full-time there as well? How does that impact on writing a book? Does it make you take longer, or does it interfere, you know, deadlines and?

IC: I just can't concentrate that much on writing, so it's actually kind of a relief to me to have other things to do. I don't know, but then, you know, over time, I don't know actually what it does. I mean, I'm on so many committees and end up doing all these things and so I don't know, it does take away the intensity of being a writer in the sense that like, This next book, you're going to live or die, depending on how this book does. You know, I don't really have that, you know.

MM: Yes, that's true. So you don't have a publisher whose got, do you have contracts for future books, or not?

IC: Um, no, but I mean, I don't think, there's no trouble for me to find one. I mean, a publisher is a

MM: But you don't have them breathing down your neck for the next book in a contract, okay

IC: Mm

MM: And do you get the four hours a day to work, just part of your job, or a part of your job, or?

IC: If I wanted to, I could, but maybe two, ja.

MM: Okay, just the two hours, really. Okay, so do you think it has a bit of an impact then?

IC: But I'm not sure what the impact is. I mean, also being part of University is very, it's widely interesting ja and you run into books and ideas and stuff and it's hard to imagine being without the ideas.

MM: So it supports you at the same time as kind of taking away some, some time. Do you have family as well that influence? Do you have family here?

IC: Ja. Well, not in Cape Town. Well, actually, I have cousins in Cape Town. I see them.

MM: Okay, but you live alone and so when you write, you are at least at home alone, so you're uninterrupted, which is nice. I heard that you don't write at UCT, you write at home always. So do you come home and then go back to work, or?

IC: I always just work in the morning, so unless I have a lecture in the morning, I just –

MM: Stay at home. Okay, that's nice and - we've covered that one already - one of the things that's quite important, or Csikszentmihalyi argues, is that if you're going to succeed in a field like Creative Writing, you need some knowledge of how the field itself works, the publishing industry, those sorts of things. How important do you think that is to a writer, having that foot in the door?

IC: It was never, ever, ever important to me at all until, but living in Cape Town and being friends with my publisher and whatever and stuff, it was actually interesting, this last book. You know, like the guy who designed it, is a good friend of mine. So we talked about the design. It was interesting. I don't, you probably need to be like a lot savvier than I am, like a lot more interested in agents and publishing and where to publish to be really successful, or maybe not. I just felt maybe if you just did it well, it would be fine, but I don't know, maybe not.

MM: How did you decide to get, and why did you decide to get an agent? Was that after your first book?

IC: Ja

MM: Or did someone approach you, or did you decide it was

IC: [name unclear] - he's just the agent for most South African

MM: Who advised you to get one, or did you just think it

IC: I think you just have to, as a writer

MM: Once you got your first book in, so, but is it, was it easier to publish a second book than it was to publish your, your first? To get a publisher?

IC: Not, really, ja, no. Well, in South Africa, yeah, but overseas, it only came out in Italy so far, so…

MM: Okay, so you haven't got to write too much about that. What - okay, the last question is that what advice would you give young aspiring writers who are still in school? What could they do?

IC: School, meaning high school, or university?

MM: In high school?

IC: Oh my God, I can't remember what it was like in high school. I guess,

MM: Well, you say is, with your knowledge now, what do you think they should go for, what's important for them? What advice would you give?

IC: It's too early to become a writer, like I think you probably don't want to start being a writer until you're 25, or 22, or even start really doing anything serious, until you're in your 20's, because there's so much to like read and think about and be curious about before you start sort of writing, but it's always worth, I think, a lot of successful writers keep journals, I never do, or diaries, or whatever.

MM: you don't keep them?

IC: Not really. Not really.

MM: So you think it would be, you give them advice to do something you wouldn't do, really?

IC: Ja

MM: Okay so and if someone's teaching the writing process in a school as well, because we do teach Creative Writing and the writing process and so on, what advice would you give to a teacher? What should they not do, what should they do?

IC: I think, I'm not really a huge fan of evaluation of writers, you know, of like telling students that, so I mean, I'm just - creative processes ultimately just need confidence and energy, you know, so it seems, I you know, it seems worth it just allowing people to write and having, there is some interesting exercises you can do, you know I taught a course, I was a tutor for a course at Yale, which had the most amazing set of exercises, because it had been going since like the 1920s and so they had all these amazing kinds of, you know, assignments, plus illustrations, from literature and stuff and that, those exercises were quite useful and

MM: Okay, so, to get, is that to get the ideas stimulated, or to get the writing process started as well?

IC: Mm. Ja

MM: But not really something you should assess and have marks for and so on?

IC: Marking things. I mean, I do it, because I teach university courses, but it seems like the least interesting part of anything.

MM: Yes and how do you assess your creative writing, just out of interest?

IC: You can't, really. I mean, if it's great, you give someone a 90 or 80, or whatever and if it's not, you give them a 60.

MM: What makes you decide, "Great / Not great?"

IC: I don't know. If it's interesting, or it seems fresh, or original.

MM: Okay, so more if there's creativity criteria for you.

IC: Ja

MM: Do you get the feeling ever that, that's quite personal a decision, or do you think there is a fairly universal judgment of that?

IC: It's probably somewhat personal, somewhat overlapping with other people. I don't know, I've never really checked.

MM: OK, that's very interesting, because that's part of the reason we're looking at all these things. Well, we've zipped through, that's fantastic. That was wonderful, is there any other stuff you'd like to share about your writing process and?

IC: It's not very interesting to me. It's like, you know, it's like I forget it all.

MM: Do you?

IC: Ja

MM: It sounds like you have trouble remembering what you did for the last, last one?

IC: Ja

MM: But you do enjoy though, the actual writing phase

IC: Ja

MM: it sounds like, so the actual process, the writing process itself, isn't all that interesting to you. It's getting the ideas out into the world?

IC: Everything is not as interesting to me - thinking about it as of itself, but to do it is interesting.

MM: Mm. So to actually do it itself. No absolutely. Can I have a look at your study?

IC: Yes, sure.

MM: I'll bring my little recorder around so I don't have to scribble notes, so you have your desktop with a

IC: Mm, mm

MM: Okay and it's got a flat screen, that's very nice. You also do - Margie says that her having an aesthetic space, is very important.

IC: Ja

MM: Is there anything about your space that you really love?

IC: Well, the mountains [he gestured to his picture window view of Lion's Head in front of his desk.

MM: Yes, okay, you have the mountain.

IC: Ja

MM: And you've got the lovely rooftops as well.

IC: Ja

MM: Yes, what made you decide to come back to South Africa?

IC: I didn't feel, I just didn't feel very American after a while.

MM: No, after a while. Did it have anything to do with the whole 9-11 [September bombing of the Twin Towers], because I read that that was difficult?

IC: Ja, it was difficult.

MM: Uncomfortable.

IC: Ja, I think that was probably why it stopped feeling great.

MM: Especially a resident of Asian descent, the Americans like to say

IC: Ja

MM: So it must have been a bit awkward - and you have a lovely Chinese box. Is that significant?

IC: Not really, most of the things that are interesting, I probably borrowed from someone, or the other.

MM: Uh-hu. Do, but they're quite pretty, though, I must say. So you also keep your space quite nicely. You've got your nice flat screen and .., your iTunes, do you keep on the computer? Do you play music then? What kind of music do you play while you write?

IC: All sorts, like, I mean, everything, really. A lot of classical music, some sort of random bands

MM: Mm, mm. So, but is it music with words, or not?

IC: Both.

MM: Both, okay, is there a predominance of one or the other?

IC: With words.

MM: With words more?

IC: Ja

MM: So more popular [music]. Is it jazz, or pop, or rock, or?

IC: I'm trying to think. I mean, what are my favorite bands, I've been listening to the Duke Spirit a lot

MM: Mm, mm?

IC: And *Pirates of Penzance* [by Gilbert and Sullivan] and Bach piano music sometimes.

MM: Okay, right, Bach. It's all very interesting. For different reasons?

IC: I'm sure, ja.

MM: It's lovely to see it. Is that [wall hanging] in Arabic?

IC: It's actually Indian. I was just, it's Hindu.

MM: Oh, Hindu. I was going to say, I don't recognise the figures.

IC: Ja

MM: Are you learning it, or is it just because it's pretty?

IC: No, no. I just came across it in India.

MM: How long have you been here on this side?

IC: About a year.

MM: About a year now.

IC: Less than a year.

MM: Okay, where were you before that? Still in Cape Town?

IC: Ja, ja

MM: Okay, it's a beautiful area, though, isn't it?

IC: It is nice.

MM: Nice, because Margie [Orford] - have you been to her place?

IC: Ja, ja

MM: Up on the hill, so you really are within shouting distance. You've got the other mountain [Orford's view is of another part of Table Mountain]. Lovely. Have you jumped off it yet?

IC: I haven't.

MM: Do the paragliding?

IC: I haven't, have you done it?

MM: My husband did it for his birthday

IC: Really?

MM: He loved it.

IC: Wasn't it scary?

MM: Oh, beautiful. He says the guy who does it, has done thousands [of times]

IC: Were you there when he jumped out?

MM: No, I had to baby-sit the little one at the aquarium , because it's a bit windy running around with her on the mountain, but also -

IC: That part of Lion's Head where they just jump off, it's always scary to walk past, because I can't imagine what it's like, you know.

MM:  Yes, but apparently you keep running and they just tell you to keep running, even when you're in the air, because once you,  it's, once you land you've got to watch out.

# Addendum F

## Transcription of the interview with Lesley Beake

**Date:** 21 May 2009

**Place:** Lesley Beake's home in Simon's Town.

**Key:**
MM: Marguerite MacRobert
LB: Lesley Beake

The interview was conducted in two parts. The two recordings were made before and after an extended coffee break.

**Part 1**
**Duration of interview:** 1:02

LB: That's the shortest conversation I will ever have with my sister.

MM: Oh, right! So you want me to record that you chat a lot?

LB: No, *she* chats a lot. I talk a lot too, but not as much as my sister.

MM: Does she outdo you? Is she your older sister?

LB: Younger.

MM: Younger?

LB: She's six years younger than me.

MM: How many of you are there?

LB: There's three. I've got a brother as well who's coming here next year.

MM: *Okay.*

LB: We're still a very close family. We see quite a lot of each other.

MM: That's wonderful.

LB: And my mother who lives in Bot River.

MM: Okay, oh, that was the shot on your web page?

LB: That's right.

MM: A *stunning* photo.

LB: That wasn't – it's not this dog – it's the previous one

MM: Oh!

LB: These photographers, they have a studio, had a studio in town and actually moved in next door, funnily enough.

MM: How bizarre!
LB: Yes, but they were very good. They're still around and they do unusual shots, but Mobster was very old when that was taken and she was just about to sleep. You can see her eyes are quite sleepy.

MM: Well, it's a beautiful photo.

LB: You never go to sleep like that, do you?

MM: My husband, you'll we pleased to hear, saw that photo and said, "Ooh, she's really young!" I said, "No, actually not." You're older than my mum.

LB: Oh, well.

MM: You were born a year before her, '49, well-preserved, yes. Well – these days, what do they say now, "60 is the new 30 " or something? . . . It's going along like that. I'm sure you do, you seem to be living a million lives still. I don't know if you had a chance to look at the Consent Form?

LB: Yes, I did and it's fine.

MM: And all the things that it says like, that you can handle English and so forth. If you could sign, please?

LB: There you are.

MM: Okay.

LB: You're organised.

MM: I have to be a bit.

LB: No, you have to, I mean, lots of people aren't.

MM: Yes, that is true. […] I'm looking specifically at the writing process, so there're lots of factors involved in that and I – before I start asking lots of specific of specific questions, it might seem like they're repeating themselves and they belong in places [reference to her pulling a concerned face about her dog making noises] – this machine can zone out all noises, but the human voice, it's wonderful. Before I ask you lots of specific questions, could you frame for me your writing process? how you would summarise it briefly, say, from start to finish, "This is more or less what it's like when I write" – just to give me an idea? What do you think?

LB: Well, it usually starts with a landscape, it starts with place, and if I'm looking for a story – because I'm often now asked to write specific stories for specific purposes – so part of the writing I do is what I call, sort of, in my mind. "Big books" which are the ones that are *mine* from concept right through. But I'm also often asked to write, let's say, 6000 words for 10 to 12 year-olds, and then I usually start thinking about landscape first and think, "Well, I haven't written anything about the Eastern Cape for a while" and . . . but I would start often with a sense of place, which is something that I think is really missing in a great many books that are written. We've got books, stories with African children in them and sort of moderate backgrounds which mention that it's happening in Soweto, or whatever, but we don't get the feeling of what it's really like to be in Soweto. I often begin with landscape and [a sense of] place and then usually what happens after that is that a voice just starts talking. I write a lot in the first person and a voice will say something like, "It was very cold the

morning; we went to get the paint" and then the story just sort of comes out. So it's place and then sometimes I think, "girl" or a "boy", but sometimes not. It just happens.

MM: Okay, so there's a . . . . Do you find, does the place lead you into this feeling that the story is going to carry on from there somehow, so . . . populated?

LB: Well, I think it, it sort of, it sets some of the parameters in advance. You know, if it's going to be, let's say, set in a large township, there's a kind of noisier feel to the story and if it's going to be in a small village in the Eastern Cape where most of the people have gone to the towns to look for work, it's already going to start with a kind of melancholy and almost nostalgic feel to it. So just having the place really sets the tone of the story, as well as a lot of the other things.

MM: Well, I suppose, in *The Strollers* you're in a city immediately. You've immediately got lots of characters. I mean, before you've been through five pages, you've had Katjies se mob and you've had this bunch of kids and you've had his parents – like back at home – and then all the little strollers and more arrive and it's very busy, whereas with something like *Song of Be*, it never gets past more than a few characters.

LB: It's a very still book.

MM: Yes, okay, so that's an interesting place to begin. And you've written about 60, or more, books. You've written many, many books. Has your writing process changed over time very much, or would you say it's pretty much the same it was as when you first started writing?

LB: I think it's pretty much the same, but it's more professional and it's possible to do things in a more craftsman-like way and to approach . . . . I mean, there is a difference between a book like *Song of Be*, or I've got a couple of new ones coming out that are much more of an individual writing process, and the ones that are done - I've got a lot to say about reading schemes, and very positive things to say about them - but they tend to be more structured, because of the language level necessities, but also because of the time limits that you usually [have to work within]. With a book like, *Song of Be*, you can take a year, but you'd have to drag that time out of other commitments. With a book like - I've got two soccer books which I've got to start next week, I've been told, 6000 words, the date is . . . , it's got to be in by "Z" and that kind of writing is different. I think you need to put as much into it, if not more sometimes, but it's more of a process where you sit down and you know exactly what you've got to do by when and that also helps with the other writing and you have to set - there's got to be some kind of date.

MM: Sorry, a book that you write, sort of more for yourself, like, *Song of Be*, is that what you – you decided to write that on your own? You didn't go to a publisher, they didn't commission you?

LB: Exactly, yes.

MM: So that one, did you give yourself a year, basically, or . . .?

LB: No, I did say that, but that was really just a sort of loose example. (To dog: "Stop chewing that!")

MM: Don't worry [about the dog].

LB: It's, I would say there are more personal books, because they're not actually [commissioned],;no one's waiting for them. There's no publisher saying, "But you said you'd send it by the end of October." So in a way, you have longer to do it, but it in some ways, that's a bad thing, because it means that when something comes up, like a soccer book with 6000 words that you have to do by end of June, it displaces that writing. But in an environment like South Africa, there is no luxury, there's no grants, there's no awards, there's no . . .

MM: And a small reading public as well.

LB: . . . There's no market. So if you want to write the other kind of books, you have to take it out of your own time that you carve out and often, it's time when you're very tired, and that makes a big difference to the writing process.

MM: Yes, I imagine it does. And the commissioned books, how long do they give you for let's say, a 6000-word book?

LB: Well, it's usually negotiable. I mean, they will say to you, for example, Cambridge University Press have just started a series called "Rainbow Readers", which are absolutely stunning and they were the most organised publishers I've worked with. We had a meeting two years ago on the 1st of June. We were given our instructions, I was managing three (boxes), so I had 30 books under my control. Certain of those books had to be delivered by the end of August, I think it was, some by October and some by December. The whole thing was planned out. I wrote 15 of them, or 14 of them and I had to manage the other writers – not edit them, but manage into the system and it was immaculately done. Everyone knew where they stood and there was adequate time given.

MM: It is difficult, though, the time management aspect, because sometimes the deadlines seem hugely flexible and sometimes, they've been very organised – actually, with me as well, telling me exactly when things are due, but when other authors don't come on board, or something . . . -

LB: Yes.

MM: Sometimes you find that half the book hasn't happened and you didn't know about it and, you know, it's difficult.

LB: A lot of it has, I think, to do with inadequate pay for work, so writers who, for example, are teaching and have been offered a certain amount for doing a textbook, think, "Ooh, that will be nice money" and then you find it's harder than they thought it was, and it's not very much money. So they put it off and it's late and I've heard so many stories like that from . . .

MM: Or you've got to wait for the money, because if it's royalty based, you don't see the money for three years!

LB: Yes

MM: And that's hard, that's a very extrinsic, long-term motivation sort of thing, which isn't easy.

LB: No, it's very bad and it doesn't promote a climate of good writing on *any* level.

MM: Is that how you got your foot into writing? Did you first send something to a publisher, or did they approach you as a teacher? Because I was approached and, you know, they saw I do creative writing at University. But did you get approached, or did you send in something?

LB: Well, what happened, my ex-husband and I lived in the Middle East for four years and when we came back, it was in 1985, I think, but long before the end of Apartheid, and I didn't want to go back into the school system, because I'd been a teacher here and Jerry said to me, "Well, why don't you write that book you've always wanted to write?" So I wrote, *Rainbow*. I think, it was a miracle it was published, because it's a very old fashioned English style; yes, interesting, but it's got nothing to do with. . . . It's a fantasy, which I don't normally do, and it is a *terribly* old-fashioned book and I think, reading it now, it's very derivative, although I didn't realise that at the time. But it, I'm looking at it and I can see it over there – I don't know if you've ever seen it. It's a, but Kate McCallum liked it.

MM: Oh, we do have it, we have it on campus.

LB: It used to be . . . .

MM: I have it in my office. It's one that I haven't got read yet, because –

LB: Well, don't worry too much.

MM: – I went to the library, when I first started researching and found a pile and I thought, Oh, my goodness, I didn't realise she was that prolific! Although I manage to, if I find something which is really fascinating, I read them in about an evening, because I sort of start page turning, but this one did interest me, because even the cover just looks so different from everything else, the design.

LB: It is. I think it might be the last, colonial-style book that was published in South Africa for children, but it was. I'd written it and I'd finished the manuscript and then we saw, or heard on the radio, I think, about the Africa Prize and Jerry said, "Oh, you must enter", so I phoned them and they said, "The entry date is today". So I went through with this manuscript and Kate McCallum [Maskew-Miller Longman publisher] said, "It's stories about Africa, you know" and I reached to take it back from her and she said, "No, leave it with me". And it must have been – if I can remember – but I think it must have been for the next year that I wrote stories and by that stage, *Rainbow* was in production, and I had another book which overtook it somewhere along the line. I wrote a *lot* in the first two years, because there wasn't a Teaching job for me and that was what I did and then *Strollers* won the Young Africa award which was the, sort of, start.

MM: Did writing give you a home to express your views a little bit, because the books you wrote, even in the '80s, are quite – I won't say "advanced", necessarily (I think there were a lot of people who felt like you) – but they were quite rebellious, actually. The sort of thing that would be banned in adult literature very often - the opinions and views.

LB: I think some of them were. It's not really me, but I mean, in children's books at that time, I think they much in advance of adult books in terms of principles.

MM: Yes, well, I read one and I looked at the date and I said, "1986" and I thought, "You couldn't say *that* in 1986, you'd be arrested", so I do think they just didn't take children's books seriously then, or . . .

LB: I think that was the case. You know, they probably didn't read them – the authorities. They probably just thought, "Well, it's only a children's book", but *Strollers* – it did have an impact on people and I went to many schools with that book and still do – I still go to schools with *Strollers*. The best example was a boys' school which probably shouldn't be named, where the boys were completely uninterested in the whole thing; they were lounging around in the Science room where I had to speak to them and at the end of it, one of them put his hand up and he said, "I just don't understand. Why don't they just get jobs?"

MM: Oh, oh, I've heard that, yes, oh, dreadful.

LB: And I was so angry that I gave them a complete talking to and they sat up straight in those benches and they subsequently raised R300, which was quite a lot in those days, for three children and they said, "We never thought, we didn't know" – you know, they hadn't realised the reality behind the kids they were seeing, being whizzed past in a Mercedes, and it did change the way that *that* particular class thought about it . And it's interesting that it's changed. I hadn't thought about this before, but in those days, it was surprising people. Now it's historical and the children who are reading it now – and I often go to schools in the Cape Flats –they see it as their cultural history; children in the Western Cape relate to that book very, very strongly, and they do things like write sequels for the book. They always ask me, "Did Johnny ..?" *Always* and they write sequels where he does [?] and then he grows

up and he starts – this is quite a common one, he grows up and he starts a special home and he and his wife – because he gets married to Mesana – they run a home for Street Children. I've come across that story about six times.

MM: Because I've met some people – well, that is sort of what happens with *Song of Be*. She goes home and gets married and it ends with marriage.

LB: Well, that's what people want to happen.

MM: I thought, especially girls will love reading that. There has to be a wedding at the end somewhere.

LB: With some of, with stories, I think the thing I regret a little bit – but not a lot, is leaving the ending slightly ambiguous, because I don't think you can tie everything up; but children of that age really, really want you to and you can't ignore that and *Song of Be* is such a tragic book. It had to have a happy ending. I mean, it was [tragic] and I wrote it in 1990, and I still work in that community and it *is* a tragedy. Individual happiness has to appear somewhere in the book.

MM: The book starts with, "I killed myself", but it ends with life going on and marriage and the hints at children anyway. Did you write the ending first, or did you write the beginning and the ending together? As Margie Orford says – because she writes those, you know Margie well?

LB: Yes, yes, I do.

MM: And she writes, you know, quite horrific stories and she said, well, she actually writes her ending first so that she knows she's going to a safe place, because she's got to sort of sustain herself. Did you do something similar with *Song of Be*, because it was such a sad story? Did you come up with the ending first, or did the ending appear to you along the way? Did you make that decision at the end? I'm interested in that particular ending?

LB: No, I think in that particular book, the story wrote itself really, because of the research. I did a huge amount of research and I knew it had to have a happy ending. I think, my belief is that writing for children, and particularly for teenagers, cannot have a tragic ending. I don't believe it should have.

MM: I read somewhere once, because I do children's literature as well and study it a lot, that the happy endings are something that irritate adults. They say, "It doesn't prepare children for the real world" and yet, I read somewhere that the optimism is a survival skill. If you don't believe good things will happen, why would you even bother with this life?

LB: Exactly.

MM: Is that something you agree with?

LB: Absolutely and there are books these days, there's a kind of school of "gritty" books where you know, practically everybody's dead in the end and there's not much hope for those that are left and what's the point of reading that, for a child – and I use the word, "child" - I don't talk about “learners” and until they are 15 I call them "children". After that, they're young people, but they are not, why should they have to cope with total alienation in a story? They can learn, like in stories, I think they *do* learn about the realities of street life, and, well, most of them – except for the prostitution angle which I left out then and I would leave out now. I think it would be too much for children. Not, you know, the children doing it, you know, being exploited, they are 10 to 12, but I think for a novel for children across the board, it's too much for them to cope with.

MM: You would change that book quite a lot? It's had 21 editions, or something?

LB: 33, I think it is, yes.

MM: Yes, it's a lot. So you would actually, that's one of the books you would . . . ?

LB: No, I wouldn't change it, no.

MM: No?

LB: No.

MM: You wouldn't?

LB: But people have said to me, "You must rewrite it and put the sex in. The drugs are in." But no, I wouldn't – not for that age group.

MM: No.

LB: And that book, you can't rewrite a book?

MM: No. It's like repainting a painting.

LB: A different book? But not, upgrade it and make it worse, or make it, you know, more deadly, or whatever?

MM: No.

LB: It stands as it stands.

MM: Yes, and if you have a strong sense of place, I presume it has to stay in that place and that time

LB: Time (mm)

MM: You wouldn't, you're not going to write a sort of updated version of it.

LB: No.

MM: No.

LB: That's my script.

MM: You've written, it was a huge amount of work: you've written *Wine* Magazine, guided readers, Internet things, documentaries, text books, I've looked at all sorts. Are there important differences in your writing process when you are tackling a *Wine* magazine story? It might sound like an obvious question and some people say "No", when you're writing a Wine magazine story and you're writing in adolescent mode, do you go about things very differently, or is it basically the same process with different content?

LB: I think it's . . . it comes from the same places, but the first thing is the language level, which changes the story, and I think one of the things that I've learnt to do in South Africa specifically, is write for levels of language. There is no patronization in there. If you know that your audience is, let's say, Grade 5s throughout the country, and if you've been to schools, as I do a lot, then you know what your language level is and you also respectfully consider that a lot of those children are speaking English as their second, third, or even fourth language – so automatically, the, not the tone, but the level of words that you can use – and also things like word play and being clever with language – just go out the window, because it's one step too far for your audience. So it's more playful to write for an

adult audience, because you can assume that they will get the pun and they'll understand the funny headline and things like that, and you can be a lot less direct, whereas with writing for children, I think from the first sentence, you have to go straight to the story. You can't ramble around too much. The person who writes about Wines who I enjoy reading most, is Neil Pendock who usually – I edited him for 10 years so I know his writing well – and he starts at a point somewhere over the other side of Cape Town with a book he read last week and works his way down to what he actually wants to say, and it's enormously intellectually challenging, but it's absolutely no use when you're writing for children, because they're not interested in that long journey between the two things. So for adults, you can play more. You can assume more knowledge about the subject.

MM: Do you, if you're writing for a more, a first-language audience, do you think that would be very different? You had a bit of a childhood in Scotland, didn't you?

LB: Yes, I was going to school in Scotland.

MM: A lot of picture books for first-language kids are very playful

LB: Yes

MM: With language and puns and picture and word combinations. Like Nicky Daly's work, which publishes a lot overseas. So do you think that's also a very big influence? That you think you're mostly writing for second language children?

LB: Definitely, yes. I have done . . . I mean, "Home Now" was written for first-language children and it's causing me problems here, because in Britain and America, which were the markets it was written for, the reading levels are higher at a lower age. So children of a younger age would read that book, whereas here it's really more of a Grade 5 or 6 book. Because it's a picture book and people have this tremendous, and very biased, prejudice that picture books are only for young children. I've been asked to read the book to five- or six-year-olds and the content is too difficult for their world experience and their language abilities.

MM: Because that would be really by the age of about four, or five in England, for example?

LB: Yes

MM: Whereas here, in Grade 5 . . . . I agree with you. It's crazy, actually, because you'd think with our problems of literacy, picture books would be a wonderful way of bridging languages and words and what they're about, you know, a content thing.

LB: You would and yet, you know, when you look at what *we* produce, I got some of these are out to illustrate .– if you look at what we produce as a picture book . . . .

MM: May I take this photo then, just to illustrate this to myself later when I'm planning to write stuff?

LB: All right yes. I'm looking for one that's got a story, but there so little text that, you know, the point is somehow missed. This one is about, it's about addresses, and where it really lived.

MM: Yes.

LB: The theme of this particular book was, "My World" and I wrote in this one that "I live here, on my door is number 4. Number 4 is on my door." People – it's eight pages or something – people think, "Well, why bother?" You know, it's so small, because we don't have this picture-book culture and it's a little, little book. You know, *Home Now*, when you pick it up, although it's a bigger book, a longer book than this anyway, it's got some substance to it, and a picture book is often hardback and it's big in size and the artwork is gorgeous and people understand the value of them, but there's no

correlation between picture books and these, which we should have more of. These first readers that children can look at and they don't necessarily read that. They look at the picture and they see number 4 on the door and then they hear the teacher read it aloud and then . . . It's how you acquire reading, becoming familiar with language and books, but here, I think, this is underestimated, because it looks like, I don't know what these sell at, but say R30 – thirty Rand, it's only got 25 words in it! You know, that's . . . .

MM: And all that art as well, and the story line and – oh, no.

LB: And people undervalue them and we don't have the picture book, with a few exceptions, like Nicky Daly, for example and Giraffe Books, and how many proper picture books have we got produced in this [country]?,Very, very few.

MM: Yes, and Nicky Daly often writes for overseas and he . . .

LB: And you can see the difference immediately.

MM: Some of his books now are very . . . like *Ruby sings the blues*, so actually, it looks like it's set in England, or in New York, or something. It's a wonderful book and a pretty African story in a way

LB: Yes

MM: Actually, I think, but it's very much set for that [overseas] audience. Right, I think it's a critical question.

LB: And yet, at the same time, nobody does anything about changing the market. They say, people don't buy South African books, but nobody provides them for people to buy.

MM: Or markets them, or . . .

LB: Or markets them.

MM: Yes, to the people who need to read, yes.

LB: So if you are a writer and you actually manage to make some kind of living out of it, then you have to work very hard, but you have to work in reading schemes. I couldn't live off what I make from writing. It's other jobs that I do - I mean, I say, "writing", I'm writing books.

MM: Yes, as opposed to writing for readers and so on.

LB: No, no, no, books, *including* readers. If I just had to try and live off my income from *any* books, I wouldn't be able to. I've always done magazine work and website work and other things as well.

MM: But as you say, that work interrupts your, sort of, creative writing process for these things?

LB: Yes.

MM: So in a way, those grants they give overseas would actually help a lot here . . .

LB: They would!

MM: In terms of making writers able to be more creative and prolific and so on.

LB: And if you work with young writers, who are not necessarily young, writers who want to write for children: I did a . . . did workshops for Maskew Miller this year where I saw over 200 people over the country who want to write for children and the chances of them being published are probably pretty slim; but the chances of getting a manuscript finished, are also slim. They all work as School Principals, or you know - jobs which just overwhelm all your days and nights and weekends and then the time that they have left – again it comes back to it's a time when you're tired – and then you're supposed to sit down and write the rest.

MM: Being awake and refreshed is quite important in all of this. I remember, Margie Orford said she took six months off when she got her textbook money back, basically, and then that's when she really . . .

LB: That's a good thing to do.

MM: Got stuck into writing. She did royalty-based writing; she was very strategic about it all. When you start writing a new book – and you've answered a bit of this – but if you start writing a new book just for yourself, what motivates you? What gives you that first spark? What generates the initial action?

LB: Well, it usually, some, you have to have a passion about what you're writing about. *Song of Be* was about the San people, which remains very close to my heart, a concept and something I work with every day, in fact; but *The Street Children* was another one. I've just done one called, *Remembering Green* which is about . . . . I've got the page proofs, proof size, so it should be out, possibly October .

MM: That's a futuristic book, which will be very interesting.

LB: Very unusually, and another one I did is an archaeological book, because I'm really interested in archaeology. I've just signed the contract on that one yesterday, so that's coming out in Britain end of this year, beginning of next year. So you have to have a strong interest in the topic and then the landscape idea is the next thing that comes up, usually, and then an enormous amount of research.

MM: And so you start the research right in the beginning, do you? Do you plan it before you plan the book, or as you plan the book?

LB: I do both, really.

MM: Both?

LB: And then as I write, as I'm doing the research, I keep very copious notes and I find, I get paragraphs . . . just arrive and I'll write them down and then later on, when I get stuck, I look through my paragraphs and see if I've got anything and sometimes, there's a whole paragraph there and it fits at that point in the book.

MM: Oh, wonderful.

LB: It fits like a jigsaw.

MM: We're going to come back to some of that in a minute and I'll ask in more detail. I think you've answered some of these – sorry, I have to do a lot of cogs turning in-between to see – we've answered a lot of questions along the way.

Your sense of audiences is very strong now and obviously, you've had a lot of experience writing for this audience. Is it much clearer now than it was when you started, because you started as a Teacher when you presumably had lots of experience with young people – but do you think your sense of audience is stronger now, and how?

LB: Yes, I do and I think, we had limited experiences in the beginning as white South Africans. My experience was with teaching white children and a lot of that was very similar to the background I had. The first class I taught was in Adelaide in the Eastern Cape and it had, there were only 14 children, but three standards and they were all extremely bright and we played . . . I mean, that class was really a dream class and I ignored the curriculum completely and we did exactly what we wanted to do and had a good time, but I didn't have an experience of the schools that we *now* have to realise are the majority . . . . I've changed that by doing quite a lot of projects where I've gone to the schools. I did a big project for Parliament where I went to 28 rural schools and *really* got a picture of what our education is actually.

MM: 2007? That big project?

LB: Yes.

MM: So at first, were you actually imagining the audience in a way and then later on, did you sort of more have a picture of your audience?

LB: It's a hard question to answer. I think the street children who were strollers, I went to work with street children so I had it there and I wrote it *with* them and they read, or parts of it parts were read to them - I got that sentence all mixed up! And some of them read it themselves and one of them said, "This is the first story about us since, *The Little Match Girl*"

MM: Oh, my goodness – that Victorian . . .

LB: Now isn't that an interesting perception?

MM: It's a fascinating thing to say, yes. So you actually wrote it with them and they read it. So your audience there was actually meant to be other street children, not other children becoming aware of street children. How did you conceptualize it?

LB: No, it wasn't really written for the street children to read. But they informed the way it came out and the simplicity of the language, a mixture of the language. When it was translated into Afrikaans, the children spoke in Afrikaans, but the slang was in English. It was quite interesting.

MM: Yes, that's true. Someone said once that swearing in your own language sounds much worse than swearing, and some other people's swear words sound comical, whereas your own swearwords sound bad

LB: Yes

MM: Because that's what would have made your mother angry.

LB: A good point

MM: It might be that and I think that's very clear already. Right, you have your idea, your landscape, you've got all of these pictures in mind. You've got your audience in mind. Then how do you get your creative writing going? When you feel, "Okay, I've got to write creatively"? You said things just come, what do you do when they don't come? How do you make them come again?

LB: You go and look for them in the fridge.

MM: Do you have anything you do to stimulate yourself creatively? I know there are lot of books on how, you know, right-brain thinking and write with your left hand and . . .

LB: Oh, no, no, that's far too complicated. One of the things is that you *have* to make yourself write – you know, it's your job – so you can't sit there and say, "I'm not inspired today". You just have to sit there until something happens and *Hap* which is the archaeological novel, was *very* difficult to write, because I wrote it on, mostly, on Sundays, or on Saturdays after I'd finished other things and I'd sit there: I'd start at 9:00 on a Sunday morning and I'd just sit there and sometimes by 5 o'clock nothing much had happened and at 5 o'clock you think, "There's nothing going to happen" and suddenly it *would* happen, but a helpful thing is to go out and sit in a café and have a cup of coffee with a notebook and all the noise has just disappeared.

MM: So you actually change your environment then, so to go away from what's predictable to you to somewhere a little less predictable, to stimulate yourself, and that . . .

LB: That can help. And with the Cambridge stories, where I had to come up with quite a lot of ideas in a short time, I went with a notebook and got a glass of wine and sat at the harbour at Kalk Bay and said to myself, "Right, before you leave here you've got to have written down three story-ideas. And then I had another system where I'd say, "You've got to dream a story before you wake up", and if I go to bed

MM: I've heard of that. Did it work?

LB: Yes, it does work.

MM: Yes, so you ask yourself a question or give yourself an instruction before you go to sleep and then when you wake up, it actually comes to you. So do you keep notebooks next to your bed all the time?

LB: I do, I don't use it a lot, but I have been known to get up and type things in the middle of the night, although not very often.

MM: Not very often. No interesting, because what creative writing books tell you to do and what writers say is sometimes very different.

LB: I should imagine.

MM: What, what do you find most challenging? Getting that original idea or coming up with an overall plot, sort of structuring it, or filling in the little details along the way? Which bit, which one of those three would you say is hardest?

LB: It's the plot. My weakest point is plots and I learnt a lot by reading…

MM: It doesn't come out in the end?

LB: I've had some good editors. Reading Phillip Pullman, I love his . . .

MM: *The Northern Lights*

LB: *Northern Lights*. Absolutely loved those books and I read them again before I went to see the film and I loved the film, but the second time I read it, I became aware that on every *single* page, something happens.

MM: You have to have pace.

LB: And I tend to go off into droopy bits about the Kalahari and then I have to make myself [focus] so with, *Remembering Green*, which was the first book I read after this fact had dawned on me, I looked much more at an excitement of things happening; but I also think the market has changed.

MM: Okay?

LB: I think children now . . . if you look at the books in Britain and America, a lot of things have moved very fast. Children, fifty years ago were prepared to take . . . I mean, look at something like *Minnow on the Save* and at Percy's [Fitzpatrick] book.

MM: Now even Enid Blyton!

LB: Very dreamy and very lyrical and descriptions of the English countryside. I don't think you get a child reading much of that [today]. They want action, they want it now and they want instant gratification like they have from the electronic media, they use,

MM: So you think that's influencing . . .

LB: It's changed.

MM: Because I've heard that even more adult novels are very influenced by films: apparently more than 70 % of an adult novel is now dialogue, because people expect to almost hear the voices.

LB: Yes.

MM: And plot structures are looking more filmic as well.

LB: Yes, I expect that's true and I think people find it easier to [read], when text is broken up as dialogue does. Writing for younger children and for children in languages that aren't their own, I think you become much more aware of the shape on the page and big blocks of texts are off-putting to them, but it's kind of a knock-on effect: children higher up the reading levels are expecting the same kind of thing and I tend – when I write for adults I have to make myself put paragraphs together sometimes because I make short paragraphs to make the reading easier But in children's reading I think this has become a bad habit – that a long paragraph is considered to be too difficult to read. So it's cut down and broken up and . . .

MM: So you think they're not prepared then for more sophisticated reading later on? I think that's probably very true, because when they get to university they can't cope with long . . .

LB: No

MM: Complex dense texts. So often there's no paragraphs for six pages, that sort of thing, and you've played a lot with plot and narrative structure in your novel. *Song of Be* has very clearly got a sort of past and present, sort of foreground and background, and then, in *Cageful of Butterflies*, distinct voices tell the story every now and then . . .

LB: Ah, that book!

MM: In an interesting way. It's lovely to read and actually a bit before its time, because a lot of modern adult novels do that now. They actually start the chapter with the name of the character and then tell the story from their point of view. What makes you decide to use your own kind of narrative structure, or another, and how do you plot it? Do you sort of draw it? Does it happen as you go along? Do you find you need to do something and then you change voice or change time?

LB: Ja, I think, partly because I write a lot in the first person. That means that that only what that person has experienced can be said.

MM: Yes, that's difficult.

LB: And so you have to have some kind of structure around that. In *Hap*, I have two girls. Lucy is the daughter of archaeologists and so she knows a lot about archaeology and Hap is a hominid skeleton that they find who she begins to relate to and she begins to sense her personality in the . . . So you can then have two first-person voices from two places, but Lucy, though, she's allowed to know quite a lot about archaeology, providing it's not too much and providing it's kind of referent to her own life. Like "I remember when Dad found the teeth", she says and she's talking about East Africa and her being a little girl and her father discovering two molars, which was the best thing that they discovered so far. The experience brings in quite a lot of archaeological stuff and it lets us know that nothing much has happened in his career since then and he gives . . . he is looking for a national geographic discovery. But it's seen through her eyes, we can't have [you are going to have a lot of dog noises].

MM: That's alright. My life is a soundtrack of dog noises.

LB: She's been chewing

MM: And drinking and you just scratch and jingle and we'll have the full symphony].

LB: So the two voices: there is a way of bringing in two people's experience and still using the first-person voice. The one which I haven't got here is called *Rough Luck*, which has just been published in Britain. It's also set in (Nyae Nyae) in the Kalahari and it's about a girl who comes from . . . it's an adventure story, and it's not a lyrical book like *Be*, although its got quite a lot of the feeling of the Kalahari. I was going to give you a copy and I discovered I haven't got one . . .

MM: Oh, that's terrible.

LB: Myself.

MM: I'll come and scratch on your door and whimper when . . .

LB: But it's much more plot-driven, it's an adventure with diamonds and diamond prospectors, but the serious issue is that if they do find diamonds, the community will suffer because it doesn't do any community any good.

MM: Like that *Blood Diamond* movie made very clear.

LB: It's not good for the people. So it's about a quite serious topic, but it moves along and I used two voices there too because, I can't remember her name, the girl in the story [Lucy], she comes from England and so she comes with - her mother is an anthropologist so it's a trick, maybe I've used it enough now - she has knowledge through her parents which she wouldn't have as a . . .

MM: A normal child.

LB: A fourteen- year-old from England, and her grandfather was an anthropologist as well. So I was able to use a lot of, I make it Beasley's life, and use people that I knew and yet we also have the San girl seeing it from another perspective. It worked quite well and I like doing it, but you can't do it in every book, obviously, no.

MM: No you do this enormous amount of research and I read that you have this big interest in history and archaeology. How do you go about your research? Do you go off on a trip, do you meet people to talk about things, read lots of books, what?

LB: All three, but the thing that's really great is that if you contact somebody and say, "I'm thinking of doing a book about merino sheep", immediately they say, "Oh, come around."

MM: Their passion!

LB: And people will talk for years about their interests, and merino was a very good example because I did a lot of research and then I got stuck and Liz Biggs, who was the Curator at the Simon's Town Museum, said, "But why don't you just go to the Karoo and ask some merino farmers?" and I said, "Well, I don't know any." She said, "My husband's family are all – her husband's family is David Biggs.

MM: Okay.

LB: And I spent a week in the Karoo and the hospitality was outstanding. I had about a whole sheep to eat while I was up there and I came back and I had the story, the feel of the sheep – and the same with archaeologists and . . .

MM: And do you plan that research now quite carefully right from the beginning? Do you say, "Well, I need to know this, this, and this" and then you make a plan to go and speak to someone who does each of those things, or does it happen as you write – you realise there is a gap and you need to go and fill it?

LB: Ja, but I think, we did the second. I mean, you start off with your contacts, the people you know – people who know people. I've got some very good contacts at libraries who are . . . Librarians are the unsung heroines of this world (and heroes, but usually they are ladies) but you start off on the trail and then one book leads to another and one person leads to another – great fun!

MM: Yes, it sounds like a real adventure. You travel a lot as well, don't you?

LB: Yes.

MM: How do you capture notes when you're researching?

LB: I have little notebooks and . . .

MM: Do you scribble like a journalist?

LB: Yes, I write all the time.

MM: Okay, that's very interesting too.

LB: And I often never look at it again, I have to say, but at least I've got it written down if I do need it.

MM: Does the writing down help you remember?

LB: I think it does, because you know sometimes, especially with articles which are much more transient, you just go and get the stuff from the notebook, but with books it all has to go in and then it has to come out again in another form.

MM: Like a sense of percolate a little bit before it comes out? And you mention in a few sources, that people often ask you about how you can write about or for children when you haven't got your own, which I always thought is a silly question in a way, because someone said once that Shakespeare didn't have to kill a king and commit suicide in order to write Hamlet.

LB: Yes

MM: But what challenges does it present to you, getting into a child's or a teenager's mind? I think it's a challenge even for parents. I don't think that's the issue here, but what, how do you manage to get into that space where you think like it? Because you write from the first-person's perspective and you write about young people and a very difficult age group, because it's so different from adults in a way. How do you get yourself into that space?

LB: Not too sure. I think the real thing that writers have to do is just watch what goes on. When I won the Young Africa award, Richard Rive was one of the judges and he came over to me and I he was a very tortured man in many ways, but he chose that moment– it was really a great moment for me, to come over and he said, "Don't think this means anything." He said, "Writers are only watchers, that's all they do" – and it's the best piece of advice

MM: My supervisor is researching him so he is going to be writing this bit down! So it's really just the watching, the watching, the watching all the time.

LB: Mmm. So you go to a school and you watch the children and they talk to you and you watch them in the school and you watch them on a bus, or whatever circumstance they are in and I think you know because landscape and social circumstances you think yourself into that and to think, what would they say? You know, one of the early mistakes that people used to make, was to use comparisons that the children wouldn't have had. You know, for example for Be to say, "It felt like silk", would be rubbish, because where would she ever have felt silk? Or even geographically – references to water, you know, they would be different, so you have to think your way into the life of the person.

MM: How do you cope with slang dialect? You've written across the whole country, Mponyane [the name means 'little gift'] is actually a Sotho name but it's in Northern Natal, so that overlap area [between Zulu and Sotho]. How do you cope with all the different language terms? Is it also research that you do, or is it knowledge from your…?

LB: If I use it, then it is [researched or knowledge from field trips], but I try not to because you have to… really, dialogue is terribly difficult to do. With the Cape one, I could do it, because I've lived here for a long time. I speak Afrikaans, but I wouldn't attempt to do it in other languages. But with Mponyane, it was an odd story because it was told to me by somebody.

MM: I was wondering about that.

LB: And that was the most difficult book to write. I nearly gave up with that.

MM: It's a beautiful book, though.

LB: The very strange circumstances, because the woman who told me about it; she asked me to write the story and she came to my house and she said it's a true story and she cried quite a lot while she told it to me, and a cold day and we sat at the fire in Hout Bay, I lived there then, and she told me the story. I changed the story, because there wasn't a lot of plot in it and also to protect her, you know, I didn't want it to be written down exactly as she told it. She saw every chapter as I finished it and every time she said, "That's very nice." That's all she would ever say, so the book was published and she got her copy and she said 'Very nice,' and her daughter read it. She was an adult by that stage and she said (she went absolutely white) she said this is - a lot of this *is* the story.

MM: So you had sensed, type of thing, their …

LB: And I don't know what, I've never asked and I don't want to know, but I think the flood and the bits at the end aren't true because he was, he did actually die in a faction fight, but I don't know which bits are true and which bits aren't. But once I started, and I realised that I'd started to write a book when the main person in it can't speak and can't hear and has no language!

MM: You're telling it from?

LB: His point of view a lot of the time. Though I don't think I'd take that on again, but I went to work with the children at Dominican Gridley School in Hout Bay and *they* were so enthusiastic about the book. I really finished it because of them. I thought, "Well, I can't really stop now." It was difficult for those reasons.

MM: Are they – sorry I don't know the area well– are they children who are also deaf?

LB: Sorry, they are deaf, yes.

MM: Okay, so they have experience.

LB: Mmm.

MM: So you were able then to get feedback from them?

LB: From people who had that problem.

MM: Yes, because a lot of people say about the book, "This is what it's like" and I always wondered how you knew that. It's a very beautiful book, a very interesting - I don't think it got as much attention I it should have. It's a very, you know –*Song of Be* is being hugely talked about, compared to it and . . .

LB: And yet it hasn't sold very well.

MM: What, *Cageful of butterflies*?

LB: No, *Song of Be*

MM: *Song of Be*? Hasn't it?

LB: It sold well overseas. It was translated into . . .

MM: Yes, in America there are articles on the internet

LB: Yes

MM: From an academic in Texas.

LB: It didn't go down well here. I think it was the . . .

MM: Very uncomfortable, I think.

LB: Ja, I think it was too close to – I mean, it was written in 1990.

MM: I can see reasons why everyone would object to it if they were being silly as in . . . . You know, some will say that you forgive, you're too forgiving of the white people and some would say that you are, you know, some would say silly things about the San people – that it is sad about what's happening to them and that's sort of degrading in some way, but I think they've all missed something. It's a wonderful book that sort of finds this common humanity between all these different people.

LB: The San people like it, which is the most . . .

MM: That's actually a big compliment…

LB: Yes. This is now a generation who, the people up there at that time, if they had gone to school they learnt Afrikaans – there were very few English-speaking people, but the new generation, because Namibia's been independent for 18 years now, *they've* been educated in English and when I went up last year, there were several people who had read it. There's a little library there where …. So that's the important thing to me and I think here in South Africa the *kleinbaas* [one of the characters: a white farmer] was just a bit too uncomfortable.

MM: And he's, I think one of the most interesting, real characters, because he's complex, he's not flat bad. You want to hate him in the beginning and then you quickly have to pity him as well.

LB: You feel very sad for him

MM: And yet he's still not nice so you sort of really struggle between the two of them. My time! Sorry, I'm keeping track on both.

LB: How are we doing?

MM: We're doing very well. I just have to keep track of my poor brain. No, no, the more you talk the better. I'm very pleased when in my transcript, there's lots of you and not lots of me. It's a challenge for me. Do you ever use autobiographical material in your books? Because you had a story that was told to you, but is there anything of you sometimes in the story as well? I've wondered about some of the white ladies, I think, especially but sometimes,

LB: I'm not sure I'm like any of them…

MM: No, no I suppose they're sort sympathetic insiders, or outsiders in a way, but the . . .

LB: Which ones?

MM: *Song of Be* with Min, I don't know you, but I wondered if she's somebody who's sympathetic, but on the outside still? So what I think you obviously, you had a better understanding and research, because you couldn't have written a book the way you did, but it's that feeling of being sympathetic and so on, but not being part of it all necessarily. You might be quite an interesting, because you capture that sometimes with people. Especially the white characters. They're sometimes a little bit in both worlds, and they're sympathetic to both, but

LB: But not too involved.

MM: Not part of it.

LB: Ja, it's a very interesting point and maybe that's true.

MM: Not not involved – I think you've been exceptionally involved. I think you're sometimes more involved than some of the people's own people. I'm just more - I don't think you *are* those characters but I wondered if that feeling you sometimes get that I think a lot of perhaps white South Africans feel you work in these areas as if you part of, you might love the community and be part of it and be researching it and you're writing about it

LB: But you're outside.

MM: But you're still outside.

LB: Yes, I think writers usually are. I don't know if other writers feel like that, but I think if you're

going to be watching – where Richard Rive is right, you know at the time I was a little crushed by his comment, but I've often quoted it since as the best piece of advice that he's given, or that I've been given. That you have to watch and if you're watching, you can't be participating.

MM: I've read that.

LB: I think it was particularly my rule in activities in Nyae Nyae. I've been going there on and off since then and the first time I ever stood up and said anything was last year when we were launching the website and you know, what I was standing up to say was, "This is your website." It wasn't anything about what I was doing, and people know me up there, but I've never been really participating actively in things like teaching or driving the Health Clinic truck, or anything. So I think that there is a kind of sadness about that as well – that if you're watching, you're not doing; but if you don't watch, if you want to write, you've got to have the space to absorb.

MM: Is it a kind of detachment that's necessary in a way?

LB: You do have to – a little bit, yes.

MM: Because it's wonderful the way you get everyone's perspective in such a strong way, and that must be from that detachment, almost.

LB: But you must kind of be there. This is very good for me.

MM: It's very interesting. No, I've really enjoyed your books.

LB: It's interesting to talk to someone who's actually read the books and with such care. It's, you know, it's very rare.

MM: Well, I was very, I'm not flattering you. I found, *Song of Be* to be a page turner. I mean, I wanted to get right through it to the end, and the same with *A cageful of butterflies*; the *Song of Be* sort of hit me in the gut right in the opening bit. I thought, "Goodness!" and I thought, teenagers are very interested in suicide as an option very often and this is quite a kick in the gut to start the book with the person dying and that keeps you on – and you really only give up in the last line, dammit!

LB: And some people look ahead.

MM: So ja, I know I should be one of those peekers, but I can't bear that!

LB: But it's an interesting comparison, though, because the reason I started with that: when I first went to the Kalahari, I knew nothing and I went with Megan Biesele who is a world expert. I mean, she's an incredible scholar, and Claire Ritchie who is also an incredible person and she's a doer. She was out there getting things organised and so we travelled up together the three of us in a truck, and I thought, "What have I done?" You know, this is way out of my depth but she, they are very cynical about volunteers and you get tested, you know, and the one thing she looks for is if when you arrive at the village if you say, "Ha, the dogs are so thin", then you're off the list, because you haven't got your priorities right. So I managed not to fall into that trap.

MM: When you're a dog-lover, that must have been hard!

LB: It was, because they are thin, but then Claire said to me, "Right, today we're going out collecting sputum samples", which is a *particularly* charming job!

MM: It's been my husband's job as a rural medical doctor

LB: So we did that and so then I passed that test. So then we talked and somehow, almost the first

thing that I asked her was what happens to people when they are rejected by their community and she said, “They often kill themselves,” and that's where that came from. It's very interesting that comment that you made that teenagers relate to that and, I think it's because their society has rejected *them* in many cases

MM: There’s a lot of aggression towards teenagers.

LB: Although it's not a small society that's kicking them out. They are still rejected on many, many levels and I think being a teenager in a Western-society-based community, is appalling.

MM: Even people who are going to teach teenagers, talk about the almost fear and sometimes disgust before they even go out to teach and know any, and it's an alien species and I always say to them, “They're children, they're people; they're not different from you in that sense, and they're going through a wonderful and tremendous and difficult jump and hormonal phase and mental development” and so on. It’s very exciting and very energetic and truly wonderful: you look a long way to find more idealistic people than teenagers very often.

LB: That's why I write for them, because they're ready for ideas.

MM: Yes, they really are and because ideas are new to them, that part of the brain has only just sort of kicked in. They're really “wow-ed” by all ideas there. That's why they irritate their parents, because they think they’re the first people to discover their ideas, but even parents – you can hear them saying, “Oh well, we can enjoy it while it lasts – that is, until they turn into teenagers!” And it's almost like once they are teenagers, “God only knows what we're going to do!” and they throw up their hands, roll their eyes and you think, “Heavens, you know, they're still going to be your children and they're still going to exist and be who they are, have always been.” They're just going to be something else as well and .., but it's not celebrated, or marked, or enjoyed.

LB: No, and it's not celebrated, as you say, whereas when they end being teenagers,

MM: From 16, yes, a big party.

LB: Then they get the party

MM: Yes.

LB: You know. It's very strange - there's no initiation or feeling of change of status. Just, there's this kind of slide from being cute into being something that, I would say, is quite feared and quite . . .

MM: Ugly, ja, and worried about, yes: “My beautiful cute child is now this sort of angry dodgy thing with pimples and greasy hair”

LB: There's that risk as well.

MM: Oh ja, no, I think it is scary.

LB: They’re looked at with fear.

MM: I think fear makes people behave badly, generally. It's one of those things. Let me see where I am. When you, you talked about *Northern Lights* and Pullman being a source of inspiration, how do you use that inspiration? Do you go back to look at how he plots, or how he does things? Do you, when you're stuck, do you go and read him, because you think, he always does it so well? How does that reading – because you read widely, I've heard – how does that influence you? Sort of your actual writing process in any way?

LB: Well, to answer the first question - I would never go back and look at another writer because I think you get depressed at how good they are, particularly if it's Pullman, and I avoid reading books on similar topics while I am writing one, you know, because then . . .

MM: Fiction, or non-fiction?

LB: No, Non- fiction. I don't read much fiction. More and more I tend to read non-fiction. I don't know why that has happened but I find it very, I don't know, I find it very difficult to read fiction these days. I can't really tell you why. It wasn't your question, though. No, I think, with plot, you do pick up tips as it were, as you go along, but if you're reading Phillip Pullman, you're inevitably thinking, "Gosh, he did that well" and really storing away things in your mind. But I can't imagine ever going to actually look at a book and thinking, "How do I ..?"

MM: Dissecting it

LB: Or thinking, what would Phillip have done

MM: So he's not actually, you don't dissect it and use it

LB: Maybe I should try doing that! That's given me an idea!

MM: I did it once, because I was writing and I like Terry Pratchett. I decided I *love* the way he writes his plots. Well, I sat and I drew, I started with coloured lines and I drew like intersecting points and I ended up with something that looked a bit like that [I did a doodle of spaghetti strings] that and I thought, "Oh, my goodness." So for my next book I drew something that looked like that. I don't know how I wrote, I think it made a very dodgy plot.

LB: I did draw some diagrams for *Hap*, because it was such a complicated plot, but I didn't stick to them. It was quite useful to have as a starting point.

MM: Was that the only time you've ever used diagramming?

LB: That's the only time.

MM: Have you ever collaged, or sketched? You're a painter as well – do you ever do that?

LB: No, with *Hap* I did a lot of, I went down to Arniston and stayed with some friends who have got a fishing chalet there and did some writing there and I wrote lots of little chapters about I mean paragraphs about the sea, and a lot of that book – well, you haven't read it, I forget – a lot of that book is to do with images of the sea. I don't write about suicides a lot, but she does try to drown herself and it's a very important part of the imagery of the book. So I wrote a lot of that and then I could put those bits together – but that book I worked on for four years before I finished it.

MM: Yes, of course, I am always interested in that. When you look up something on the Internet it sounds like it's about to still happen. So it has been published, has it?

LB: I signed the contract yesterday. It's being published in England. I didn't try it here, I took it through. It's a very lyrical book, it doesn't have a page-turning plot and so I did two books that were done much about the same time. One is, *Remembering Green* which is a seriously moving plot. I thought about it quite a lot before I started, and I thought, you know, rather than just write something, let's think a little bit about the market. So I chose, "Global Warming" as a kind of theme and set it in the future , which is very unusual for me and the girl is called "Rain" and it's written . . . so there's a lot of, you know, the usual Lesley Beake type of thing here – and she has a lion cub called Sa which she is responsible for. It's a totem animal, not a pet and she and her lion cub are captured by people called Tekkies who are still trying to run a sort of first-world establishment on Table Mountain, which

is an island.

MM: Yes, I read that Table Mountain was an island, which is a lovely idea.

LB: So it's quite good fun.

MM: But with you writing futuristic books, it's like writing what will one day be history, I suppose. Is that how you conceptualise, as you get through?

LB: Ja, it was quite interesting and you had to, the vocabulary of the landscape had to change a lot because it was fun making up words too. I battled with my editorial with that, but it was fun. I made up words that would have been . . . because things change so they call it "sockball" and the boys play sockball and she queried that, "Is this Soccer?"

MM: Yes, well, language has merged and so on too. It should be very interesting.

LB: I . . . aspects, because you've got to salt it with a few little things that make it in the future, otherwise it doesn't [work], it's just a story that you've said happens in these years. So it was a lot of fun to do, but it's a trilogy – I am hoping that the first one does well enough for them to . . . .

MM: Very interesting.

LB: And the idea behind the books is that indigenous knowledge is where the future of the world lies. So there's a boy who is San. His name is Gowe and he comes to the island to get her and they leave the island together, blowing it up on their way out.

MM: Oh, that's exciting!

LB: There's another girl called, Tugela – I have been saving this name for years. Once when I was doing some research, I read an 18 [hundred and] something newspaper and it said that Miss Tugela Smith will play the pianoforte, and I thought, "One of these days, I am going to use that name." There was a girl called something like Tugela, but she comes from a river in the mountains and Rain comes from a place they now call "Popo" (which is the Limpopo). So the idea is that by the third book, all three children will have brought their communities together to…

MM: That's a wonderful idea and trilogies are . . .

LB: They're very popular.

MM: . . . A big thing to do, these days. No, absolutely.

LB: I think like the series used to be when I was at school. You know, you got all the 53 "Chalet School" books. You had to have read them all if you were anybody.

MM: Yes, it's true. "Sweet Valley High" and so on. I wasn't big on those *very* long series. Three is about as much as I can manage before I . . . you know, the book must now end! I liked the ending.

LB: Yes.

MM: The ending is what you're reading towards and it's hard for me to wait.

LB: Have you read this new one, the vampire one?

MM: No?

LB: I haven't either. Its one of those ones that swept the world like Phillip Pullman did. It's called, *Twilight*. The film has just come out.

MM: I am horribly ignorant of what's going on.

LB: I haven't read it, an American correspondent, also doing her Masters, but in America, said, "You must read this", but when I saw it was about vampires, I actually faltered slightly and I didn't buy it.

MM: Yes, although I see on your book here, evidence of a vampire on "Rainbow" with a dragon, so it looks vampirish, with a . . .

LB: A devil's dragon which couldn't catch fire.

MM: It's great that you write across such a range like that. Someone said about George Bush in the future (that's what I was thinking), he said that history would judge him and a comedian says, "I think you will find the future will judge you"

LB: Yes.

MM: It was quite fun when I read about your Table Mountain story.

LB: Yes.

MM: I thought of you and history.

LB: Would you like a cup of coffee at this stage?

MM: Yes, why don't we have a break, before we deal with slightly more technical things?

**End of part one of the interview.**

**Part 2**

**Duration of interview:** 56: 28

[some irrelevant conversation omitted]

MM: Right, I'm going to be sort of nit-picking a little bit more. It's the technical details now. When you're doing your initial planning on your books – and I presume this is different when you're doing your trade-publishing-type books and your own books – do you work with anyone else when you're at the initial planning stage, or is it completely solo?

LB: No, I don't, but having said that, I've always been blessed with *particularly* good editors. You know, I was talking about librarians being the unsung heroines, but editors are the other ones and they also, almost always, are ladies. I had one man once, Darryl Bisto, who edited *Jakey*. I enjoyed working with him, but they've all been wonderful, so although I don't usually work . . .

MM: Talk to them in the beginning, or?

LB: With somebody. I'm just rethinking the answer to that. You know, editors are always a part of the process, but not usually from the beginning and at the moment I'm working on an anthology of *Sky* stories for Macmillan, and I made the proposal which is a different thing. You know, before you didn't do that. You just wrote a book and submitted it. Now I always work the other way around and submit a proposal first.

MM: Is that a new thing then, the synopsis? Because a lot of publishers don't want the book at all, they want a synopsis?

LB: Ja, it's very hard. The market has become [very powerful] and one has to think about it. You have to think about the market, because there is no point in writing a book if it's not saleable. I mean, everybody's dog thinks that since J.K. Rowling did it, they can also become as rich as the Queen if they just turn a word processor on – and the word processors, or computers, have made a huge difference; before when you used to have to type it out on a typewriter, the commitment was huge. Now it's text and things, *everybody* is writing books.

MM: Someone also wrote a book by SMS

LB: Yes, a young man who came to one of my workshops – he'd hitched from somewhere in, where was it? – Northern Province. I asked them, "Are you all working on computers, or are some of you writing by hand?" and he said, "I'm writing mine on my cellphone." It's just an incredible thought.

MM: So do you think those people aren't really committed to writing as such, it's just that?

LB: *He* was.

MM: Their way of telling a story has now become, "Well, we could make money out of it." Do you think money is the motivation there, or do you think there's nowhere else for people to tell stories?

LB: Perhaps I'm being a bit flippant about the J.K. Rowling thing, but I think it is a factor, you know: a lot of people think that it's very easy to write a Mills & Boon, because it's only a romance, and others seem to think that it's very easy to write this only for children. So I get hundreds of manuscripts sent to me. The most recent one was about a frog who had a romance with a mushroom

MM: On drugs, perhaps? That sort of mushroom, was it red with white spots?

LB: Really odd - and this was written at a level of language and density of text that would be for about 11 and 12-year-olds. You know, it wasn't a short little – people have got no idea, but they think they can write books, so there's a huge flow of people sending manuscripts, which are normally not going to be of much use. I mean, I read hundreds of manuscripts a year. I get one or two that are really interesting enough to send on to publishers and it's very sad, because it takes a lot of effort and a lot of passion and people are very reluctant to believe that it's not a brilliant masterpiece. I had one where the hero of the story was a Tsetse fly and this is an impossibility! You cannot have a hero of a story who is something as despicable as a Tsetse fly, and there's nothing good to be said about them. You've not got much personality, in other words, he's not really very cuddly. But I think it has influenced the market, because it used to be very difficult to get an agent. Now it is impossible to get an agent! Publishers wouldn't accept manuscripts. Now agents won't accept manuscripts!

MM: So there is this selection process that you've got to almost get your foot in the door at some point, and that knowledge about how to get your foot in the door, is actually a big part of being around, so . . .

LB: Yes and it's, you know, it's another craftsman thing. You know, you do your apprenticeship by publishing a number of books, there are certain reviews, there is maybe an award or two, then you can approach publishers and say, "I see that you publish this kind of book and I'd really love to do something for you", and two or three years later, you might get a book, accepted by them. I mean, *Hap* has taken four years. *Home Now* took eight years.

MM: After all your success with writing?

LB: Mm-hmm

MM: Why was that? Because you tried a new genre, or . . . ?

LB: Well, partly, but also because it was Britain and there's so much, you know and you've got lots over there already. So it's very hard to get in.

MM: So you can be an exciting writer here who gets . . . you know, you must know every major publishing house in South Africa: You've done Cambridge, you've done Maskew Miller-Longman and you've done everybody, really.

LB: Ja , but it doesn't mean anything, but the books are different. You know, I wrote *Home Now* for Francis Lincoln. I don't know how well it would've gone down here. If I'd written for here . . . – I keep looking at it, it's up there in Korean – [referring to a copy of *Home Now* on her bookshelf].

MM: I was going to say, a really interesting language!

LB: If I'd written it for here – I mean, this book [holding up a copy of a reader she has written for the South African market], *The message*, is a much better book but that's what it looks like, you know, it's a, it's . . .

MM: (Mm) It's a reader and people often dismiss it.

LB: You'll never see it, you'll never see it here.

MM: Well, it won't get within sight of a shop. No, it will only be prescribed in schools.

LB: But it's, it's . . .

MM: I've been trying to get hold of your readers and it's just about impossible for me, even in educational things.

LB: Exactly. No, they're only interested in selling to Education Departments.

MM: Well, that's where the money is, yes, really and yet – so much love has gone into the book. You can see that.

LB: I'll give you that copy, if you like. Of the Cambridge ones [readers]. I felt very strongly about it. I I wrote it as a short story and then I adapted it as a book; it was a story that came to me when I was flying up to somewhere to go and do a workshop. We flew over the Kruger Park and you saw the landscape change from Johannesburg Central to the outskirts, to farms and then to . . . we saw elephants from the 'plane as we were flying over and that was the start of the story, and then I wrote about a returnee who comes back, back to his family.

MM: [quickly reading the book Beake had just given me] It's a page-turner, this book, because this is lovely and the last line of each page makes you want to turn over. I wondered if she'd been afraid and then, "My grandfather gave the bull to my father" and each one of those is another story line you want to pick up on. Beautiful, thank you very much. I like that. Books are always like . . . one day we'll have to raise the roof to fit more in.

LB: Yes.

MM: That's good. Right, can we go into those.

LB: Does that answer the question?

MM: It did. Don't worry, sometimes I answer questions I hadn't thought of, which is even better. You've changed planning methods and tools over the years at all? The way you set out to plan a book and what is the most effective planning method you've ever used? Do you sort of storyboard a book at all, or?

LB: I do with the small books.

MM: With small books, okay.

LB: I think, story. I use flat plans, which I learnt to use in magazines because I edited magazines, so I was designing the shape of the magazine as well as commissioning and for a smaller book, it's critical, but when you get to that level, once you get past the level of "B" Grade 4, it's not necessary at that stage, but I what I do – what I'm just thinking about, because I hadn't really thought much about it before – but what I try to do, is divide it into 10 chapters – and they don't always end up *being* 10 chapters, but then I know how many words I'm aiming at and I have a plan. So a thousand words a chapter is quite a nice amount for young readers. For young, inexperienced readers who are struggling with language, it's not too big a piece of text. For older children I go maybe up to 1500, but it is the basic structure I use to get myself through the book, because it gives you a measurement and it also means that the book is . . . then I write down. Counting the words is very important to me, for measuring progress. So at the end of the day . . .

MM: Psychologically important to you?

LB: Yes

MM: So that you know you're moving forward, okay.

LB: Right, I count them a lot and now I've got used to working that way. Usually, I aim at 10 chapters and then divide into a number of words that I think are appropriate for that age-group and then, all through the day, I'm just checking: "How far have I gone? I must wind this chapter down. Let's get this information in" – you know, so it's a very useful structure to use for (my best secret) actually getting yourself forward. It *pulls* you forward. You sit down and you think, "Well, today I've got to do 1500 words."

MM: So again, it helps in a way – not having the luxury of writer's block, you just give yourself, almost like a task: "I've got to do a thousand words"

LB: Yes, you have to do it.

MM: "Or so many pages by the end of the day."

LB: And then during that time, you think, "Oh, we haven't heard about that person for a while", or "It's got too static, something's got to happen". [She chokes on her cake a bit] - I do this a lot at the moment. I try and eat, talk and drink coffee at the same

MM: It's multi-tasking for the body [laughing].

LB: I'll come back to that later. Ja, I can't remember what I was saying.

MM: We were talking about structuring by a chapter by using a number of words as a planning tool.

LB: Yes, it pulls you along and you can mark things out and it gives you a sense of [progress] – now the end of the chapter is coming, so you've got to plan towards that cut-off, because a chapter has to finish on something that makes you . . .

MM: I was going to say, because it's not just a number of words. It's a structural unit, a bit like a paragraph is a structural unit. So if you were writing in short paragraphs and short chapters, that must surely influence how you structure your plot and how . . .

LB: Yes, it does. I think it helps me, because I know my weak point is the plot.

MM: I don't think it is your weak point at all. It might be this thing you've struggled most with, but it's not your weak point in actual books at all, because even a lyrical one like, *Song of Be* is very strong plot-wise as well. It really does pull you along

LB: Good.

MM: Very much so and where am I? I'm just trying to put little symbols along the way. One, oh yes, this was a favourite quote of mine: a children's writer said she was writing a story and (Dorian Haarhoff told me this one) and a group of elves showed up and she said, "There aren't any elves in this book" and they said, "But we're here now" – so she had to put them in!

LB: [Laughs]

MM: Has that sort of experience ever happened to you?

LB: Oh, yes.

MM: A character you never planned for?

LB: They just turn up. I really believe that we write our books subconsciously; they're there and you start thinking about an idea. I've got a sort of plot for – "plot" is not the right word to use – a plan for a book around genetic testing and the change of identity when people think they are, let's say of Viking extraction and then they find that they're not, and in South Africa, of course, there are really obvious startling things that turn up. So I've had that idea in mind for about a year and I've spoken to various people about it and you know, slowly but surely, that book will emerge and I think more of it has emerged, more of it's there than we realize, when we write the book. I'm talking . . .

MM: Things that have been interesting you for most of your life like that name that appeared in the . . . those things are sort of cooking away somewhere on the backburner and eventually, they resurface.

LB: You suddenly [find] and the names and characters - I mean, "Hap" just came out of nowhere, the name of the person.

MM: I like it. In Afrikaans, it's like a "hap", a bite.

LB: Mm. Yes.

MM: Something to do with the teeth. But you know, that's very, very interesting, I find it all, all totally fascinating, actually.

LB: Dorian was an old friend of mine and we used to run workshops in Windhoek together and write children's books.

MM: Okay, he was also in Namibia and so was Margie Orford.

LB: Yes

MM: There was this big weird Namibian conspiracy

LB: Yes

MM: I'm going to write the next *Da Vinci Code* about the Namibian, sort of, freemasonry network of writers or something that has taken over South African -

LB: Good.

MM: No, I'm joking. The language in your stories is very poetic and sensual as well. You're very good at sensory imagery and you clearly love – as you say, you like the lyrical stuff more than plot almost. So is the love of language quite important for you to get you going? Do you often start from a quote, or a word rather than necessarily the plot itself?

LB: No, but I think the love of the landscape is where I start. I think that's what we need most in South Africa, maybe across the border, but certainly in children's books in South Africa and the best writer – the writer who does that best – is quite elderly and her books are quite old – is Patricia Wrightson in Australia. When I do workshops with writers I almost always read something of hers. Her language is very dense and *very* lyrical, but when you've read one of her books, you have a sense of what Australia was like when it was still – you have the sense of the aboriginal myth coming through but we don't have that, enough of her writings.

MM: Do you think it's because we're quite literal? Sometimes we don't encourage children to play with words enough? Do you think that playing with words is quite important for reading and writing?

LB: I think it's essential, but we're losing it. You know, it's, if you use quotations – I used to do this a lot in magazine writing – I can't think of a single one, of course, but magazine headlines are often very clever. It's a kind of trick that magazine editors love to show off with.

MM: Terrible puns, yes.

LB: Terrible puns, references to lines from a poem, or something, and almost all of those now are out the window, because people don't understand what the reference is, in the first place.

MM: Well, said I find myself, my mother said the same, coming to South Africa: you use something that's quite an ordinary idiom – we were talking about whether you could eat with your fingers, or finish the last bit on your plate and I said, "Oh well, the English manner is, you're told not to scrape the pattern off your plate" and my Afrikaans colleague thought it was absolutely hilarious. That was such a novel and quaint way of speaking and to me it was something I'd heard every other adult while I was growing up, say at least once, and the same with lots of idioms that are actually old. People think that I'm being fresh and original when they should be a cliché almost – but yes, people don't

LB: I think of the things that we were taught when we were at school, like, "Where do you go to buy things? Do you go to the Fishmonger to buy fish? Do you go to the haberdasher to buy buttons?" you know, a lot of the richness of the language is disappearing because people don't need it. I sometimes get this argument with editors that a word, which is a beautiful word, can't be used, because it's not current and I usually stick up for the word quite strongly, because we can't just take them all out and just have sentences that are basic English, otherwise there's going to be nothing left. I can understand Second Language and all those things, but there are some words and my great argument about that is, when the children want to read it, they will. Look at the dinosaur mania: every child in the world could still do “Tyrannosaurus Rex” and . . .

MM: Yes, even in Grade One, my worst spellers could spell those names.

LB: Because they *wanted* to spell them.

MM: Also you don't have to know every word in a sentence to understand a sentence, so it's silly to cut words out.

LB: They *should* actually learn to read without understanding every word, in a sense, so that they can read.

MM: Precisely

LB: Crucial.

MM: Because of inferential reading and the odd word meanings and so on. Your syntax also every now and then is interesting. I wondered if it’s possibly Scottish, or if you were being poetic as such, but you often use that: "Tall she was" – instead of, "She was tall", you say, "Tall she was". I've seen it in a few of your books, is that a Scottish idiom coming out, because it sounds to me, I can almost hear a, sort of pirate speaking when I -

LB: I think it's a slowing down device. If you put words . . . I mean, I'm making this up now, because I don't know . . .

MM: Is it not conscious?

LB: But I think, if you want the story to slow down and especially, I mean, now let's have a look, but after exciting bits, you would want to change the pace – no, it's not Scottish.

MM: I haven't made a detailed study of this, but I just, I picked it up in one of your first books and I thought, "That's an interesting syntax." You seem to do it at times when you're almost reminiscing and someone's describing someone from the past almost. It's a slightly, almost an archaic form, to use; it sounds like an older person telling a story, like an old sailor. It really does sort of remind me, "How tall she was", of a Cornish accent, or something?

LB: You know, maybe it's a remembering, a remembering mode where you're thinking aloud about a person, because when people are remembering, often, if you ask them to remember something, they won't look at you. They'll look at something and they'll say something like, "Tall he was"–- you know, I think that's what it is, maybe.

MM: It also emphasizes the adjectives, doesn't it? It puts it at the beginning.

LB: Yes

MM: The word, "tall" is what first springs to mind then, so that's also in your consciousness of – or is it something that just happened?

LB: Something just happens, yes.

MM: A-ha! And . . .

LB: No, I'm not that clever [laughs].

MM: You're cleverer than you realize. This is wonderful. I read in a book on Children's Writers, but it was very old, because it must've been from the '90s, that you work on a laptop, but I see, you moved a laptop when I came in.

LB: Yes, that one over there?

MM: You seem to have about six computers in the house

LB: Well . . .

MM: And you've also got this lovely Apple over here. What do you work on while you're writing, and which one do you work on when, and how does that work?

LB: Right, well, the overindulgence in computers is because I work on websites a lot and I had the old PC which is over there. If I had to do the website on that, I would go blind. I mean, you're working with images and the movement of stuff on the screen all the time – it really is a terrible distraction to me and that screen was old. I was going to have to replace it, but I had bought it, when my laptop collapsed, (because when I was writing with magazines, I used the laptop out of the house a lot). I've had a Mac for about a year; it was a huge decision to change to the Mac, the big screen is just fine.

MM: And isn't it a beautiful object of desire?

LB: And it's beautiful. I went, you know, like these men go into sports car shops and they come out and they say, "I went into that shop and I said, 'Can I see?' and I looked at it across the room and I just fell in love with it". I've had it now for a year-and-a-half.

MM: So apart from the software, it's also probably an accessory sort of thing, but it's a beautiful object.

LB: Yes, it's beautiful to work with and if you work on something all day, you should work with some pleasure. I was *very* lucky when I started writing *Rainbow*, I was using my dad's old golfball typewriter and a friend came and said, "You must use a computer." They were very new and I said, "Oh, I'd never be able to use a computer." He was in Sales and he came around with one that he didn't need to use anymore and he put it on my desk. It was like a little piano. It was about this size. And I said, "I'll never be able to use a computer" and he said, "Just type in your name" and I typed in, "Lesley" and it was an all green and on the screen it said, "Hello, Lesley." I was just hooked forever! So I worked directly onto a computer. I do write things, but basically, I write straight onto the computer. So the theory was that I might now and again work downstairs on the laptop, but this one is so lovely to use.

MM: And when you go out to one of your coffee shops, do you take your laptop with you again, or?

LB: No, I just take a notebook.

MM: You just take a notebook. You said, sometimes you don't work straight from a notebook – do you type the notebook out onto the screen, or do you look at it sometimes, or is the notebook just for getting ideas down?

LB: It's mostly just ideas and then occasionally, I'll get paragraphs. When I did articles, I used to write the whole article in there. With books, I'll sometimes just have an idea and write it down.

MM: And then do you type that up from the book?

LB: Yes, what I try to do is have a file that's got notes for this book. Then if I think of something for "Hap", I will put it in, and it's quite surprising sometimes when you go and have a look at that file – it can be extremely useful.

MM: How do you organize things in your file? Do you have little categories that you think up beforehand and you organize all your material with?

LB: Sometimes

MM: Like a scrapbook?

LB: I mean, what have we got? I think I've got a *Hap* file somewhere around. I don't really know the answers to some of these questions.

MM: Here's a *Hap* file, right here.

LB: Okay.

MM: Is that your . . ?

LB: Oh, well spotted.

MM: Now and then your brain does pick up things. Can I take a photo of what's inside this one?

LB: This is actually the book.

MM: Is it the book itself? Oh, you mean that it's in a rough file.

LB: There should be a file with "most called" [the name of the file]. This one has got some ideas of, a card from the publisher at Christmastime.

MM: Even cards.

LB: Well, that was just because I . . .

MM: A picture of the front cover

LB: Of the? Sorry?

MM: How you organize ideas is very interesting

LB: No-one's ever been thisinterested before. Right, that, ja, this is the kind of thing I was meaning. If you wanted a photocopy of the file, like an example?

MM: Absolutely.

LB: These are just little fragments that were useful.

MM: A copy, that would be brilliant.

LB: And then . . .

MM: You can often read from a camera, but I don't know this camera very well. I'm not sure I can . . .

LB: These are the more fragmentary notes, these are more.

MM: .. bits of hand- . . . .

LB: This is music. You know, these things that I was listening to, I didn't use this in the book, but I thought I might – things that she might listen to -–these little things – they just all came together, so you can see this has got Chapter 12, Chapter 7 – but this is not absolutely typical. This was a terribly complicated book and the other thing that happens a lot, is that I work – in *this* book, particularly, I wanted to be sure that the – that was a reply from somebody [referring to an email in the file]– I wanted to be sure that the science was correct. There is the kind of thing that I do with the chapters, and there are the word counts, and then I do it again in pencil and then I do [here we were leafing through her file, which she later let me take home and copy]. . . .

MM: Interesting. So that helps you structure it out.

LB: But it's just little bits and pieces and [some of this dialogue makes little sense as we are pointing to and reading parts her file at the time].

MM: You actually wrote out that story line once .... You don't know sometimes what you are reavealing by saying these things

LB: No, no.

MM: You'll read my thesis eventually and it won't put you to sleep. Thanks, that's really interesting, okay, and that's not necessary typical of any book, that's just that particular one?

LB: But bits of it are, you know, what was it, would it be any use to you to borrow this?

MM: Ah, it would, it would definitely

LB: Would you promise on your . . .

MM: Life not to lose it, or anything? Yes. I keep everything confidential at the moment as well, before I put it all in, but would you mind me writing up about it and so on?

LB: No.

MM: Oh, I would love to have. . . .

LB: I'll come and *find* you if you don't bring it back!

MM: No, I'm good as gold, I swear and I would love to drive out here again, so that's beautiful, because it's really . . . I'm hoping I can steal . . . Margie Orford has got interesting ways of working as well, because she has – I don't know, have you seen her writing hut?

LB: No, no,

MM: It's a pristine writing house. Laptop, nothing else than a few notebooks and it all looks very interesting, but if you start delving there are sort of archives in the house, books a lot like yours, files and interesting layers of writing. How do you work through – once you've got everything on a computer, do you print things out then, to read them on paper sometimes, and then scribbles?

LB: Sometimes. I don't want to do it too much, because it's expensive, but . . .

MM: How do you work through drafts, for example? How many, you must go through many drafts, how many?

LB: Well, with *Hap* there were about five [not entirely audible]… and it went backwards and forwards by email to Megan Beasley who is a very close friend, but she's also, I'd say, a mentor on the science . . .

MM: Almost a 'critical reader' we would call her in academia.

LB: And the list of people who helped, is huge. I think it's the longest acknowledgement list I've ever done, because John Parkinson at UCT and Jeanette, sorry, I can't help you …

MM: That's alright, don't worry at all.

LB: They all read various bits of it and helped me make sure that the science was right. It was very difficult to find a time period when the sea levels were right, but art had appeared. You know, these things like that.

MM: Oh, goodness, yes.

LB: And so easy to make a huge mistake and then the whole book loses its credibility.

MM: What, credibility with your readers as such, because would they know these details?

LB: Well, probably they wouldn't, but one hopes that by the end of a book, they would know some of those things, so you don't want to put anything, plant anything, that's . . .

MM: A lot more conscious, the average American film maker who gives his history (Phone rings) - sorry, .. answer that phone

LB: [telephone conversation]

MM: Sorry, these bits will be fairly quickish, I imagine. You said, you sometimes go away to work in another place. Where do you do most of your work and why is that? Do you do most of your work here?

LB: Mostly in my office, but it's good to go away. For books about places, ideally, you need to, you reacquaint yourself with that place, that would be the ideal. If you're writing about the Karoo, you should go to the Karoo . . .

MM: Do you need to go there to write, or do you go there, do your research and then come back and write here?

LB: A bit of both.

MM: A bit of both.

LB: And I do use the laptop for that.

MM: Yes, so that gives you that freedom to travel which is important. When you're writing by hand, do you write particularly fast?

LB: No, I used to have a very, very neat handwriting, but I had an injury to my arm and so my handwriting – I was lucky, it was a nerve injury and I was very lucky to get the use of my hand back – but since then, my handwriting has been pretty much illegible even to me and especially if I'm tired, you can barely read it and it's tiring to write. I find it much easier just to type.

MM: Up on the computer as well?

LB: Mm.

MM: And do you work with pen, or pencil, or colour, or anything like that? Do you have a particular preference?

LB: I like particular pens but it's very difficult to get too attached to a pen, because you can lose them so easily; I've managed to have this pen for about a year.

MM: A ballpoint, I see you have a ballpoint.

LB: I like roller balls, but they tend to be a bit - I don't know, I always used to use a roller– are you *really* interested in this? [Laughter] [Absolutely]– A finer point rollerball, but their quality has gone down and they don't last very long, so I changed to . . .

MM: Someone said Biro didn't invent the ballpoint pen, he just got it to be something that worked usefully. Apparently, that was the challenge. Many people had invented ball pens, but not ones that work very well and he was a printer, he was in a printing, so he knew about ink and he got the whole ball bearing and ink thing right

LB: So useful.

MM: So you're big on your ballpoints, and good ones. Any particular brand, just out of curiosity?

LB: Well, that's a Parker. It's the first time I've succumbed to Parker. I used to have one that I liked, that mysteriously vanished in the middle of a production of *Aladdin* in Windhoek, but I think that was a Cross, but any pen, really, but I like it to flow. It's got to write easily and the paper must be shiny.

MM: The paper must be *shiny*?

LB: Mm.

MM: Not matt. Why shiny?

LB: I like the pen to move smoothly over the page [Okay]so the more you've got to, the more drag there is.

MM: Do you have a brand of paper that you're interested, or particular notebooks? Margie Orford is the only writer, I'm asking, she's just got these moleskins.

LB: We all got like that after what's his name, Bruce Chatwin, told us to.

MM: Yes?

LB: Yes, I use the moleskins.

MM: You use the moleskins as well, do you? Okay, that's interesting and the size, which ones do you use? The small or the big?

LB: Both.

MM: Both?

LB: Mm.

MM: Which ones do you use, when?

LB: Well, I try to do the shopping notes and things in the small ones, but sometimes you don't have that one with you and then other times, I usually have the big one in my bag for writing stuff in.

MM: Uh-huh. Is that the?

LB: I need to move this slightly [her cake plate].

MM: Sorry, that fly is following you.

LB: But I don't exclusively, I also tried these for a while, because they're cheaper [the Croxley's] but I got bored with them. This one is just a little expensive. The moleskins are lovely, but I must admit, there is a kind of writing pretension

MM: A bit of a luxury, but they do feel nice, they're supple.

LB: Ja

MM: So they're sort of nicer to work with from that perspective and . . .

LB: And the tools that you use should be lovely. You know, if you can afford to buy a nice notebook rather than just a scruffy one . . .

MM: Well, people spend thousands on cellphones, why not?

LB: Exactly.

MM: If marketing is their business, why not on pens? And you type? Do you type fast? Are you a good typist?

LB: I type fast, but with two fingers.

MM: Okay, so it's more a necessity. Did you learn to type then while writing?

LB: Mm.

MM: It wasn't that you did typing?

LB: I wish I'd learnt to type, but I didn't, and I couldn't think any faster than I type, so you know . . .

MM: So you type as fast as you think? It's very fast actually. Do you think being able to type quickly is important for your writing process?

LB: Yes.

MM: Why?

LB: Well, just in terms of exactly that, keeping up, so that you don't think of a thing and then you've lost it before you finish typing it. You know, I think I now type what I'm thinking. As it's coming out, I'm typing it. That's really an important skill.

MM: So you actually learnt to type fast, I presume, so that you could keep up with your own thoughts?

LB: Yes.

MM: And how would you describe your spelling ability and your grammar ability? I presume you're quite good at both, if you are also an editor, but they've got to proofread it, though . . .

LB: It's pretty good. I mean, I've been doing this now for 22/3 years, so it's a practice thing.

MM: Is spellcheck important to you still?

LB: Yes. [dog barks] Sorry, I think it might be the postman, he's a terrible danger around here. I think the spell-checks are great, I always compete against the Spellchecker and when I see the word, I *always* try and work out what's wrong with it. It's a kind of compulsion, but it's more typos than spelling mistakes, and I know which words I can't spell. I only just managed to get, what's the word I've learnt this year? It's a very basic word that I've always got wrong , but I now type it correctly.

MM: So you think it sort of comes over time? You become aware that you spell that word wrongly, and then you've learnt?

LB: Mm.

MM: So were you a naturally good speller when you were young, or not really? Is it something that's come with practice?

LB: Well, I can tell you a funny story that my teacher at school, who was called Miss Beattie – I must have been about 10 –told me. She said to me, "Lesley, you've got a very good vocabulary," and I said to her, "Miss Beattie, what does vocabulary mean?" So that's an example of where we were then. I don't know, I suppose I am a very good speller, and I always spell text messages very carefully and . . .

MM: I do too. I can't do texting. I like real spelling. I'm not a good speller, but I prefer it. Your grammar? I presume you're good at that?

LB: I hope so.

MM: And do you think those things are important, spelling and grammar, to being a writer?

LB: Yes, I do and I think I often see - [dog barking loudly]. Sorry, okay. "Lara! Peter!"

MM: Sorry, just a few more questions and we're over.

LB: I think it is the postman [referring to dog's continued excitement].

MM: Is that the navy siren?

LB: And all the dogs bark.

MM: Shame. Do you think it's important to be good at spelling and grammar if you're a writer?

LB: I think it's very important to do the best you can and one of the most irritating things for editors and publishers, is manuscripts that have been done on a computer and haven't been spellchecked.

MM: So it's not that they are not necessarily good spellers. It's the fact that they haven't bothered to sort of proofread before they . . .

LB: Mm. And you know, a great word I like using is, 'respect'. If you're going to submit something, you should do it with respect and take as much care about it as you can, If you get a brilliant manuscript that's been poorly spelt, that's not an issue, but inconsistent spelling means that they're just not paying much attention to what they're doing, so . . .

MM: When did the attention come into it for you as a writer, because now you sound like you're speaking as an editor?

LB: Ja, that's true.

MM: When you're *writing*,when does spelling bother you and when doesn't it? Does it bother you as you write?

LB: Yes, it has to be right.

MM: Okay, so while you're writing it and you see a mistake in a paragraph, you actually stop your thinking process and go back and change?

LB: No, the red [Spellchecker underlining], I can't . I tried, but I can't do that sort of stream of consciousness where you then go back and do proofreading- I like the page to look right.

MM: Along the way?

LB: Ja.

MM: So actually, that's important to you. What would bother you most? Would it be poor sentence structure, poor word choice, or poor spelling?

LB: Poor word choice.

MM: The word choice. Why is that?

LB: That's where the power is. The other things are irritations, really but word choice is the writer's and that's where they . . . that's what it's about, so you've got to do that right first.

MM: How polished, if you work with publishers for a very long time, how polished is your final draft that you send to them, or how much do you expect the editor is going to work back with you again? I mean, how much do you feel, "Okay, this is the final product and the editor is just going to tweak it a bit"? Or how much do you think, "Okay, well, I'll work with the editor?"

LB: In the beginning, I worked with such good editors. One of them was Annerie van der Merwe. She was my first editor, on a book called, "Detained at Her Majesty's pleasure".

MM: We've got that one

LB: She taught me an *enormous* amount and several other editors that I've worked with have really taught me an enormous amount about writing, but I think, two things happened. The one is that you get better with experience, so I hope my manuscripts are cleaner when I hand them in, but also we've lost a lot of the editing skills that we used to have. You don't find an Annerie van der Merwe under every bush anymore, and, I mean, the editors that I worked with in the '80s and the '90s all became heads of things. They all moved on to be the CEO of Oxford, Tafelberg, Maskew Miller. They were very good, but these days, it's such appallingly paid and with such dreadful conditions in the job, that people don't stay very long. So your chances are that you'll be working with a fairly inexperienced editor and they are relying on you to tell them what's going to happen. Here in South Africa, I'm talking about. So I rely less on them now for two reasons, but I think it's also practice. I've written 70 books, so then you've had a fair amount of experience on how to present and I've also done a lot of editing myself on the books, as well as magazines. I think that has helped.

MM: So with your initial writing, you'd say, the feedback was terribly important?

LB: Oh, it was *immensely* important and I always acknowledged tremendous input, because you know, it was in the days of "stickies". We weren't working electronically. You'd print out and hand in and put on these little yellow stickies

MM: You had to fix those instead, but now you've got "track changes" and comments boxes and everything.

LB: I hate "track changes" with a *passion*.

MM: I know, it drives me nuts as well. I like the comment boxes, because they don't interfere with the main text. With "track changes", you end up with all these [red lines] – it leaves what you've already written and puts in new stuff – it's horrible! When you're writing, do you tend to write the whole book right the way through, or bits? There seem to be lots of bits, generally, and then it fits all together?

LB: Bits. It's almost always being disturbed by other things. Last year, I decided to spend quite a bit of the year doing books and there were about three months where I just got up and wrote every day, which was wonderful, but it was the way things worked out, it was very . . .

MM: I'd like to know, if you've had a bad day and a lot of words on paper, but it just isn't working for you, do you throw it all in the bin, or do you keep it and rework it later?

LB: I haven't often thrown a thing in the bin.

MM: Press delete

LB: I print what's appropriate on paper. I always rework. What I do, which is probably quite an important thing to tell you, is that I start at the beginning every day and go through, so when I'm writing a book, what I try and do is finish off at a useful point so that I can think about it overnight. If I'm working solidly on it, then the next morning, or the next time I start working on it, I start on page one and make corrections as I go through. So by the time I've finished the book, I've read it hundreds of times, and then I go back and fix things. So for example, if the man in Chapter 7 has a limp and I hadn't mentioned it before, then I need to go back and make sure it's in there at some point.

MM: Continuity

LB: Yes.

MM: I just wrote a novel, I haven't finally polished it, but I also found out I'd killed someone's dad off and then later on, he was sort of there having a cup of coffee!

LB: Yes, it happens very easily.

MM: I had to get rid of him again!

LB: Or she's blonde and then she's not, and you know, these things are very hard to pick up

MM: Yes.

LB: You get so absorbed in the story.

MM: You sort of can't see the wood for the trees, so to speak, and when do you, what signals do you need to take a break? Do you take breaks? How long can you work before you need a break?

LB: Well, quite long periods. I mean, at the moment I've got this terrible guilt feeling about not working flat-out and I'm not supposed to be working till next week. I usually start, in the summer, I start about half-past six. Winter I start a bit later and work a bit later. A luxury that you can have, is getting up a bit later; it's still dark and then I work later in the evening.

MM: What's your average working day?

LB: About 12 hours a day.

MM: And how many breaks do you take in a day?

LB: The dog has to go for two walks a day, which is really good for me and it's thinking time. So I take her down to Long Beach at the station. So we go in the car, so that the walking is on the beach, not *to* the beach and so that happens twice a day.

MM: What would ring a bell and say, 'I need a break' for you?

LB: Actually, I work on the siren [the navy docks sound a siren that can be heard all over town – it went off during the interview].

MM: Oh, really?

LB: When the 10:00 siren goes for their tea, I think, "Have I taken the dog down yet?" and if I haven't, then I'll take her; and I often stop when they have their lunch siren at one o'clock.

MM: Does writing ever feel a bit too intense for you, and that you need to detach from it?

LB: No, the best thing is when you're really in it. I mean, that really *is* the best time.

MM: Right, so when you totally lose yourself as well!

LB: Yes.

MM: You're the first reader of your writing. Do you show it to friends and family, or do you wait until it's your editor, or at what stage do you start? You say, you send things off to your scientist friend and other readers?

LB: Yes.

MM: So when does that happen? At the very end, or during the writing?

LB: During the writing.

MM: During the writing?

LB: Mm

MM: Who is the first person to read the finished book?

LB: It usually depends who's around

MM: Oh, really?

LB: There's no particular person I take it to, but there is a list of people who read all my books, so, you know, obviously my family get copies and I send some to America to my friends.

MM: So before it's been actually printed and published, the manuscript is now done, who?

LB: Nobody reads it then. I mean, well people do who were part of the story and people who were involved in creating the background - they would've seen the whole thing, but I don't give it to my mother before it's published, or anything like that.

MM: No, so you share with those people you've been working with during the book and only then, the publisher, or does is the publisher come in?

LB: The publisher is last in the line.

MM: The very last in line – that's interesting as well. Is there a particular time when you must work alone in the writing, that you really don't want anyone else in?

LB: Not really, I mean, if the input is always good; the input comes not in the creative process, but in the factual process. So if I was nearly finished and somebody phoned me up and said, 'There's just been a new discovery that Rock Art was around earlier', or something, then I would be very happy to hear that.

MM: That's wonderful. So you don't mind those interruptions.
Did you ever attend writing classes and courses and workshops?

LB: Nope.

MM: All self-taught – and did you learn anything useful about writing at school?

LB: Yes, I think I did. I went to a school which, – the school and I didn't really see eye to eye, but we did have a very good English department and I think they *did* teach me a lot about it.

MM: Is there anything particular you can remember?

LB: Yes, I can remember Miss Littlewood, saying, 'Lesley Beake,' (Lesley Durr, it was then), 'I have now officially decided that nobody in this world is ever going to teach you how to use an apostrophe.'

MM: Is that why I had to look at the apostrophe coming through Simons Town? [In her email giving me directions, Beake told me to look out for the apostrophe – people sometimes miss it.]

LB: Yes

MM: I did miss it. Where was it? I looked. And I used to get really easily irritated about apostrophes. My students know that.

LB: It's not there. It's just an insignificant little …

MM: Oh, right.

LB: And then the irony of that is I ended up editing; a great deal of my time I spent editing for quite a while, and the most important thing is to change the apostrophes, because everyone gets them wrong.

MM: Yes, it's true. It's very annoying. So your school, did they teach you sort of specific writing? Actually, the basics like the grammar and so on that was important? Or did they teach you anything about creative writing?

LB: There was quite a lot of creative writing experience, it was good in that, and then I went to Rhodes, where we had a primary teaching course which was absolutely, incredibly good for primary school teachers, but it wasn't very practical. We didn't learn much about teaching, but I think we did nine courses altogether and the first – no, I can't remember now. It's something like seven or eight first-year courses and then two or three second-year courses. It gave us a tremendous education and the English department at Rhodes was fantastic in those days; it probably still is. They had the Journalism Department, but English was very, very good.

MM: And did they help you with your writing as well, or more with . . .

LB: No, I didn't do any writing, really. I mean, I started this book, *Rainbow* when I was at school, but it was never really finished until – that would've been '84, '85.

MM: Have always wanted to be a writer?

LB: I *think* so. I always have written. You know, I've always had . . . I don't have any of them now, because when we immigrated [to South Africa from Scotland] when I was 16, we had to clear out all our stuff – that was it. These are the only things I still have. This was a magazine I produced, a Chinese … all with my own illustrations . And proofreading.

MM: Oh wow. Who did the proofreading? Was it you?

LB: Me. That's why it's called the *Puppery Magazine*. [She shows me an example of her early childhood writing at this point.]

MM: Oh, the Puppery and – I think that's lovely! Are you going to ever write a dog book in South Africa?

LB: *Merino* has got dogs in it. *Merino* had my dog, Maxwell, in it.

MM: Oh, and you actually have dogs in *Cageful of Butterflies* as well. They've got lovely – Oh, this is beautiful; it's historical evidence like archaeology [looking at her magazine].

LB: That's the only bit that survived.

MM: It looks *beautiful*.

LB: How to draw a cow.

MM: I love the labeled drawing too, that's marvelous. I have all these old books about how to draw things. The 'plain full act' . . . . Sorry, that is just gorgeous. Oh, it's so sweet. How old were you? It's lovely.

LB: I guess about eight, maybe nine.

MM: Some rhyming as well. Funny. It should be so inspirational for kids to know you did this.

LB: But my father was a salesman. He worked for Lets Diaries, so at the end of the year, we used to get all the diaries. I was always making books and diaries. And this is quite an early one.

MM: [reading] *Hen without hay*. It's beautiful. I think that's lovely. I think it's wonderful that you kept it as well. That's fantastic, oh sweet! And the way you've made it into a book, I mean, it's really been -

LB: Well, [a piece of more recent paper], *the Puppery Magazine* has all the ten flaws are usually demonstrated in a first manuscript: No obvious quality control, not finished on time, written with the aim of money, because it cost sixpence, illustrated by the author – don't do that! – not planned properly, not adequately researched, over-ambitious, under-funded, filled with drivel and encouraged by family!

MM: Oh, brilliant, that's wonderful.

LB: I must've done that for some workshop or other.

MM: I was going to say – oh, but it's gorgeous. You know, it has optimism and tenacity, which are very important skills as well. I think we've got most of it now. You've worked on some very big writing projects with young people and you're an ex-teacher. What advice would you give to young, aspiring writers in school?

LB: Go in, well, go into school! You mean young aspiring?

MM: Well, not that young necessarily. I mean, anyone who wants to be a writer. whose in school . . . -

LB: Well, if they're in school already the thing is to start writing down their experiences now. Whenever I go to schools, I say to them, I always, I almost always ask them, "How many people here are writing a book?" and you would be amazed – and I am talking about schools across the board, not just your St. Cyprian's, but your Khayelitsha schools – they are always at least four or five who put their hands up and then, usually later, a couple more will add themselves in, and I say to them, "Please keep what you write" – because what happens is they write things and then at the end of the year, they throw it all away, because it's rubbish. I say to them, "You're never going to be 12 again", or whatever: "Keep the stuff in a file, it won't take up much space and then when you are a writer, you can . . . " (this is just about practice). "And *read* more!" The trouble is, it is very hard to get hold of good children's books to read. There usually aren't any in their school, there's no bookshop. If there was, they don't have any money; you know, the libraries have been run down. It's a shocking state of affairs, and for writers who want to write for that age group, they need to just read for that age group [books aimed at adolescents and children]. Make the effort. The workshops I've been doing lately, have been called, "A child's point of view." They're about writing for teenagers, encompassing readings from about . . . I take photocopied pages of about 50 different books; and then there are points where it's obvious that this one or that one will be the appropriate one, but I have some spares that cover questions that people ask. They are gob smacked at what people write for children. The things like that book we were looking at downstairs – they've never seen or heard. Often they have just seen . . .

MM: It's a proper novel, a hard cover, yes?

LB: Mm. They haven't experienced modern writing for children in any shape or form.

MM: They've only seen those old . . .

LB: *Wind in the Willows*

MM: A writer from Australia read, well, *The Wind in the Willows* – that's also still fairly sophisticated - but a lot of them have only seen those texts [basic readers]: Jack sees Jill. Jill says, 'Here's puppy' and the one Australian editor of children's books, he actually showed us one of these texts .

LB: Yes, it's the same either way.

MM: And he said it's the same if you reverse it completely.

LB: Yes.

MM: How does one get on your mailing list for workshops, by the way? I never hear of your workshops. Are they through the publishers?

LB: Well, I'm going to be doing more. I haven't advertised them ever, maybe that's . . . In most cases the publishers ask me to do them

MM: Mm. Yes.

LB: Maskew Miller asked me to do these – I love doing them – they know I do, so they always ask me, because they know I'll say, "Yes" – because you get to meet all these wonderful people and 200 people in a fairly – I mean, the advertising wasn't extensive.

MM: And does teaching about writing, help your writing as well?

LB: Yes, it does, it does. And they must read and they must go into schools. They look all nervous when you say that. You must go and say, 'I'll come and read stories to the children', or something. Offer to help with sport. They always need volunteers for something, but get to speak to some children.
MM: Yes. What about the language teachers teaching the Writing Process? What would you say they should tell young people? What you've just said, or is there something specific?

LB: Well, I think the same things apply to the teachers. Almost invariably, they need to read more too. I think an example of excellence is important

MM: And my last question is around sort of social variables. I read on one site that you said that you've got a very supportive family and friends, and that you don't have children, so you've got a lot more time to work on writing and you've got a lot of support with your writing. Do you want to talk a little bit the influence of your family and friends on your writing and the writing process? Generally, what influence do they have on your writing?

LB: Well, quite a lot. Not so much my family, but I have a very wide circle of friends and a lot of them have come through books. I mean, I met Megan Beasley when I went and asked her if I could come and help with something in her fieldwork, and through her, I've met many other people, including archaeologists, which is where *Hap* came from. Each book turns up some more people that are part of the books and there's a lot of influence. I mean, when you meet people, you want to make friends with them and then you go to their house and then it goes on from there; so I think the books have influenced the friends as much as . . .

MM: Are you still married at the moment?

LB: No.

MM: A personal question, but do you think it's important to have a stable home life of some sort, you know, whether you're alone, or in a relationship? Does it influence the writing?

LB: Yes, I think it could get a bit chaotic otherwise. Gerry really supported me in writing. He wanted me to write. We ended up working at Windhoek Airport, he worked at Windhoek Airport, so we lived at Windhoek Airport, which is not an ideal place for any lifestyle, but it did give me a lot of peace and quiet, to get on with . . .

MM: Yes, so you think it's important, and free time too?

LB: Well, it is, but I don't think many people really get the chance to do that. I mean, there's always an interruption of some kind. Even when you haven't got children and you aren't married, there's usually somebody staying here, the website work is ongoing. When I was doing magazines, the phone would ring *all* the time and people don't realise you're working; I've never ever managed to achieve this quiet room where I sit and work on my own and nobody ever interrupts me.

MM: Who is normally staying here? Sorry, is it friends and family?

LB: Well, this is a kind of posting house for people from America and Europe and there's always coming and going.

MM: So it's a lovely place. It really is for working. I mean, it seems quiet and out of the way.

LB: Today has been quite remarkable. One phone call, one barking!

MM: But two visitors – me and someone else are ready to help you, so that's interesting. No, that's very, very, very useful. Sorry, this was a personal one. So I leave it to the very end, but I think it's what we were talking about earlier in the kitchen – about, you know, creativity and creative people, you know – whether you have a busy social sort of life or whether you have a quiet life – which one is important? Because you get people who think it works the other way around: you *must* live a wild and exciting existence and chain-smoke and be an alcoholic and . . .

LB: Yes

MM: You don't agree with the idea that people had to be, sort of tortured and . . .

LB: No, I don't. The power of writing, in a personal sense, is to be able to imagine things. You don't have to . . . you know, I mean . . . you could never [experience everything first-hand]. I have this discussion quite a lot. When I wrote, *Song of Be,* there was a conference at UNISA and two very articulate young Ovambo women stood up and virtually attacked me for writing about San people. 'You are not San, you are stealing people's stories' – you know, this kind of very political statement. In fact, I still, I'm in contact with the one. I had to justify myself, and I said, 'You know, I don't, I'm not Russian and I'm not a man, but I can write about a Russian prince in a book if I want to and nobody comes and says I'm being . . . – I'm a lot closer to *Be* and I did my homework.

MM: Well, for centuries, the only writers were men and they wrote about – you know, they got published and they wrote about women as well.

LB: Yes, exactly, so you can't be like that. Anyway, I convinced them and they came and apologized afterwards. I was quite pleased, but it was very eerie at the time, and you know, [there

is]the Black/White issue and who writes whose stories and all that stuff . . . I just carry on and ignore that, because I don't 'take' stories: I make stories from experiences and things that I've crossed in *my* life and experiences are – many of them are – universal. You know, if you lose a, say you lose a brother, or you have to leave your home and go and live somewhere else – those things are the same, whether you're living in Russia, or whether you're . . .

MM: My mother paints mostly black people and a lot of people have met her and said, Oh, they thought she was a man and black, because of the kind of painting she does, which is odd! Well, she always writes just 'K. Ambrose' – and 'Ambrose' is a name you could pronounce many ways

LB: Oh yes, yes.

MM: So a lot of people are very surprised to meet her in person

LB: Very interesting.

MM: Yes, but like you, she's travelled a lot and my father was a missionary in black townships and so on

LB: Mm. And being with people.

MM: She also has this sense that people are universal, that's what she paints. She just paints what she sees. She doesn't feel that she's not allowed to paint them, because she's not one physically. . .

LB: No and quite rightly so. No, you can't be restricted by that kind of thinking.

MM: And no, because that whole idea that people had to be tragic and . . . . On the other hand, there was the idea that, you know – drugs and those sorts of things . . . to keep things…

LB: Have séances

MM: Medication Not too many mushrooms and frogs.

LB: Yes.

MM: Thank you very much. That was a really very valuable discussion.

**End of interview**.

# Addendum G

## Transcription of the interview with John van de Ruit

**Date:** 16 June 2009

**Place:** A restaurant at The Vineyard Hotel and Spa, Cape Town.

**Duration of interview:** 2:38:49

**Key:**
MM = Marguerite MacRobert
JVDR = John van de Ruit

**Interview:**

MM: No. I am more interested in writing process than products of this, though, because that is the thing, most people, when they talk to authors about what they write, tend to ask them about the product. You know sort of, you know, "Is Spud you?"

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And who is Boggo?

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And all that sort of stuff.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And as a result, it is very hard to pull to pieces what the person was doing, when they actually wrote the book,

JVDR: Yes.

MM: Because everyone treats them more like what are you *thinking*, when you wrote the book, as opposed to what you were *doing*.

JVDR: It is exactly that. It is exactly that. Ja. No, it is nice to talk about process actually,

MM: Oh, I'm glad, good.

JVDR: Because I don't often, to be honest, ja.

MM: Before you do, I haven't emailed it to you, because I knew you were away, but this is the standard, horrifically long, sorry, ethical clearance form.

JVDR: Okay. Is this MacRobert or is it MacRober?

MM: It is MacRobert, I am afraid. It's a Scottish name.

JVDR: Oh, it is a Mac. Okay.

MM: It tells you the more academic detail and then something that is important to know is that this is not confidential, so the -

JVDR: Yes.

MM: -You know, the recording itself and the transcription go with my thesis.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: But that if you would like to see it first and edit out or withdraw at any stage, you have that right.

JVDR: Okay. I'm pretty sure that everything will be fine, hey.

MM: Ja, I am not asking a lot.

JVDR: I don't think I need to go through all the fine print, I am sure.

MM: No, I am not asking about personal . . .

JVDR: Okay, if you are happy.

MM: – Personal things and I am happy to, I do not want to e mail you three tons of paperwork, but if you would like copies of things, that is fine.

JVDR: No. No. Thanks. I'm not big on paper work.

MM: If you don't mind if I ad lib – I might mention you in my – I am going to Wales on Thursday for a conference on Great Writing.

JVDR: Wow!

MM: So I am more telling anecdotes about each of you, you know.

JVDR: Please spread the news.

MM: No, certainly, I have got pictures of covers of all your books in my talk

JVDR: You must have *Spud* coming out of your ears.

MM: No, *Spud* is definitely getting major coverage

JVDR: Oh, wonderful, thank you.

MM: Before I ask lots of specific questions about the process and sometimes it might seem like the questions repeat what we have already discussed,

JVDR: Yes.

MM: But I sometimes angle for more detail.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: Could you? You have just finished writing *Learning to Fly* very recently.

JVDR: Yes. Ja.

MM: I was impressed by the speed with which it got into print.

JVDR: I know. I know.

JVDR: And it just usually takes a whole year or something, but obviously, this is like –

MM: Because you finished in March?

JVDR: 28th of March, ja, and I think it went into print on the 18th of April.

MM: And it has got pictures in as well, I noticed, which is quite something, so . . . .

JVDR: Ja, Vern's pictures of Roger.

MM: Did you draw them?

JVDR: No.

MM: Are you Vern?

JVDR: Yes.

MM: What I would like to, seeing as it is fairly fresh in your mind –

JVDR: Yes.

MM: Could you, if you briefly told me your writing process more or less from start to finish, how would you describe it?

JVDR: Well, I mean, it's certainly evolving, my process, compared to where I started with the first *Spud*. I feel like I've really now refined the process down. What I did with *Learning to fly* and I assume, you are talking about *Learning to fly*? specifically?

MM: Any writing process that talks about *Spud*

JVDR: Well, the first . . . Let me take you through it. The first *Spud* process (for *Spud* itself) was . . . basically it was an experiment. I was an actor on the road and performing every single night, but for an hour and a half, at seven o'clock, and then I just had these long days. Quite often we'd be in Jo'burg, or Cape Town or Pretoria or wherever and I just had this huge sort of space and I felt like I was just going slowly mad, so I began. The process of *Spud* was almost like a doodle. It then became something a bit more significant and then, obviously, it's like you build and build and finally, you feel you have got something, you know, you have got . . . . I mean, I did not know what I had and I was obviously always just hoping to get published.

That is all I was thinking about and I wasn't thinking about a target market. I wasn't thinking about commercial success. I did not even know if the book was commercial. I didn't know if the humour would travel. I mean, I was so scared off by talk about the publishing industry, I'd heard so many horror stories and people said, "Ah you are wasting your time." And it is like nobody gets published and you know, all those typical stories, and so I really had very low expectations. I felt that the book was good, but you know, I also was aware that probably everybody who writes a book thinks their book is very good. So, you know, that was like a long process and it was quite an open-ended process, because obviously I did not have a

publisher. I was just writing it and I decided, well, once I was content or felt like I could not really go further with it, I would then start looking for a publisher, but that almost quite scared me, so it was safer just to keep the book and . . .

MM: Keep going?

JVDR: Ja, keep going and keep going and so, when I wrote the book, I wrote it in numerous cities and in places like around the country from Mpumalanga to whatever. I remember writing Gecko's death in Cape Town in the middle of winter, but the great thing about that was that I felt that, in a sense, each place sort of informed the book in a weird way, and there are many flavours in that first book. When I read it now, I almost can say and I remember writing some of it in the Northern Cape in a dry, arid area, when I wrote the Uncle Aubrey scene and whatever. Wherever I was, so it was actually, when I think about it now, quite a random process, but it slowly came together and then obviously getting published was just amazing. I mean, it was, that was the biggest thrill. I mean, I think, that trumped anything that I've had since, I mean and I have had numerous highs and great news and so forth, but that was the biggest thing for me and I think, legacy was certainly the thing foremost on my mind at the time. The idea of leaving a little footprint; you know, as an actor and a playwright, it is such a transient sort of medium, if you like, that you feel like you – once the show is closed, that's it. You know, it just comes with a little footnote on your CV, so that was the first one. *The Madness Continues* was an incredibly tough process, because now suddenly I had publishers putting pressure on me and they committed to a publishing date and I had never written under that sort of deadline before.

MM: Did you plan to do a sequel or did they ask you to, when they signed the first book? How did that happen?

JVDR: No, they never ever put pressure on me. But my thought was, I mean, you obviously have a lot of time when you are writing a book to fantasize about it. I mean, my major fantasy was seeing my name up and having it up in a bookstore, you know, in print. Now it seems quite ridiculous, but it was. That is all I wanted and I always had this idea of whether I could follow it through. Not just for a sense of . . . it wasn't to do with money or commercial success or anything. It was just this idea that, when I consider where I have started at boarding school and where I finished, I was almost two different people and that is what I am trying to do with *Spud*; when you still hear the voice, it's the same tone in the voice, but he is . . . and I think you will find this in the third book. There is a sharp growth and I am talking about a sort of emotional growth and a growth in his voice. Just in the way he, just the maturing, I suppose, but I wanted it to be a seamless process right from the beginning to the end, so I always have this idea of this, this growth perspective that would flow through it and obviously, I knew that this third book was going to be my growth book So in a sense the second book was the toughest, because not only did it have all the pressures and the deadlines, I was also a professional actor and *Black Mamba* was really doing a lot of business, we were doing sort of 150 - 180 shows a year at the time.

MM: You won an award for it, didn't you?

JVDR: Yes.

MM: So it must have been in demand.

JVDR: Ja, ja, we did, I mean, we had huge success. We won quite a few awards and we, sort of – it was a clever, well-written sketch, a well-performed sketch-based comedy, you know and we could pack it all up into a trailer and we'd go. More than half the year, I was performing every single night, so it was very tough. I was trying to balance that. I remember the . . . it came down to this point where I was in Jo'burg for six weeks. We were running at

the Liberty Theatre on The Square, staying in a little flat in Sandton by myself and I would do the show, finish at like ten, come home, write until eight in the morning and then sleep all day until five, get up, go back to the theatre. And I did that process and I actually wrote about probably about forty per cent of the book in six weeks, so it was not a nice process. It was so intense, so pressured, also it was quite a violent book and I decided that what I wanted to do was, I did not want to try, I couldn't out-*Spud*, the first *Spud*. I couldn't reach those emotional highs. You know, once you knocked off Gecko, there was no way I could try and eclipse that in the second book, so I decided to work against that and to go for something a lot more violent and a lot more sort of . . . I suppose exploring the rebellion of these boys led by Mad Dog and that sort of wild-man syndrome that always had an inevitable conclusion which was disaster and big trouble, because the institution wouldn't let them get away with it in the end. You knew that they were eventually going to get squashed and so it was a very different process, that, for me, and it was the first process I had had. Then I went on a tour, a book tour for three months, where, you know . . . it sounds so glam before you go into it, but gee, even now for ten days, I'm like, it's my hand! My wrist is exhausted and for example, I am signing pretty close to a thousand books a day now or six hundred books a day and grinning at six hundred people and making conversation and it just eventually gets exhausting. But the madness just went on and on and on and I called it the 'madness'. It was really the madness of *The Madness* [reference to his second book: *Spud: The Madness Continues*]. When I got to the end of that I decided I needed to change something, because I was not really enjoying it anymore. I was not enjoying being this famous dude or this celebrity writer or whatever you want to call it. And I felt like – I felt like I had reached an end and I felt like, what I needed to do, I knew I could take control of the situation. I just needed to communicate effectively. I knew now what I needed. I know now that it takes me about a year or just over, maybe a year to fourteen months per book. I need that time.

MM: Not bad.

JVDR: It's not bad, but that's also professional time. So, obviously, I got rid of the acting side. I quit *Mamba*, I, my girlfriend has come in so brilliantly now. She really like takes care of a lot of stuff, my publicity, my tax, all that stuff that, you know, just drags your brain away from it.

MM: Terry Pratchett's wife apparently fulfils the same function. She filters his mail.

JVDR: Ja, exactly and I've chatted to a lot of authors, successful authors whose spouses do that and a lot of women's husbands do it, hey and they actually become like – and they've got a marketing background, or something – and they actually become very influential – and so has Julia become very influential in my life in terms of being able to let me focus. So, anyway, going into this third book. First of all, I took six months off. I just didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to do anything and then –

MM: Was that last year, when you went to Vietnam?

JVDR: Yes. Then, went to Vietnam with Jules for two months of backpacking with the idea of seeing what is happening. I was not even saying, look, when I go there, I've got to do work or anything. I packed a little notebook that said, 'Spud 3, go, you biscuit!' to try and cheer me up. But I seriously had reached an end of sorts and then one . . . I mean, travelling does that, you know, just that wonderful freedom of backpacking and in Hanoi, we spent some time there, and in the old city, I was drifting around and I certainly felt so creative and I felt that's when it started to bubble and then we went down the coast and we stayed for about a week on a little island in the South of China sea in a Bohemian sort of resort with an outside shower and toilet. One of those really nice ones, but quite humble as well and a leaky roof and so forth, but with a veranda that just overlooked high above the ocean below and this jungle and it was just amazing and it just poured out of me and all the things that, I think, had

been sitting there poured out of me and it was big things. It wasn't just about details and what characters we were going to do, but it was big, over-arching structures and the idea of growth and the idea of flight and the idea, the notion, of more subliminal growth: a sense that I wanted to age his voice, but I did not want it to suddenly sound like my voice or an older voice. It had to work seamlessly - but I wanted to get that and then I . . . the other thing is like I knew immediately that I wanted Boggo to be the driver of this book. In every book there is a sort of driver in a way and I knew that would add the comic element, so that it did not get too serious or aware of itself which I really didn't want to do with the book. It has got to keep that same, 'jig-a-tee-jig-a-tee-jig' [he taps out a tune here – fast-paced and racy]. And then underneath and then the odd punch in the guts and then underneath is a sort of deeper layer for people who want it, you know, perhaps about adolescence and about growing up and then things like, you know, life is not black and white, but shades of grey and those kind of more subtle sort of elements that I think are always there, if people want it, but if they don't want it, they can just still laugh and have a good read, you know.

MM: That is something, ja, a very special thing your books do which is why I think they sold so well compared to a lot of other books in South Africa. You have really broken like the record again and again,

JVDR: Yes. Ja, I know, it's crazy.

MM: And I think part of it is that people feel that you can just read it for fun, but if you want to go into it, there is lots of stuff and there's, I mean, everything from layers of masculine friendships down to, you know, adolescent sexuality and apartheid.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: I mean, it is amazing what you can do.

JVDR: Yes, thank you, but I mean, obviously, a lot of that comes back to the fact that I did my thesis on masculinity and on private schools and on looking at the way - now this was way before I did *Spud*.

MM: In Drama, you did your Masters?

JVDR: Yes, it was Drama and Performance, but, I mean, obviously, it is a very murky subject, but there is very little theoretical stuff for theatre. You've got, I mean, you know what it's like. You have got to sort of manipulate to get there, but I certainly looked at the way that private schools, boys' schools, worked and looking at the public schools overseas, an international look, and how they were portrayed in theatre and then also in movies and books, so mainly in looking at another country, at Julian Mitchell's play, Anthony Ackerman's *Old Boys* and I had written a play called "War Cry" soon after leaving school

MM: Yes, yes, I heard of that.

JVDR: and looking at those three plays, but then also referring to like your *Dead Poets' Society* and then your *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and looking at the history of masculinity and obviously, my theoretical chapter was very much on the constructs of masculinity, hyper-masculinity, stereotyping, you know, stratifying boys into various strata of, almost forging the identities that these institutions and then, also, looking at the double-edged sword. The way that schools, sort of, portray themselves and then the reality inside all these, that's represented in all these books and movies and plays of how it's totally contrasting to that idyllic, elitist education. So anyway, that was my thesis, but anyway, I am going off the topic here. Getting back to the process: basically, I came back and I had, I mean, within five days I just filled this book and I felt, I was back. I was there and I liked it and I liked the ideas. I felt, it wasn't

just, because I didn't want more of the same. I feel like I never want more of the sameness. But I've got to keep shifting the, shifting it. I have got to keep shifting. Also for me, it just becomes tiring, because I mean, I could just trot out more and more stories of Crazy Eight doing crazy things, but that is obviously now no longer really exciting for me anymore.

MM: It is also limited in terms of place quite a lot, as you wrote them in different places but it's all set in the same place.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: So it must be hard to come up with plot devices to get the kids out of the school to change the plot

JVDR: Yes. Yes, it is.

MM: And the characters can only realistically change so much,

JVDR: Ja, ja, exactly.

MM: And the staff changes are not that often and so on.

JVDR: I have succeeded in that this time, because I have pulled them out for two major things. The first is that they go a girls' school for a term to do a Shakespeare and the other one is they go into "Mad Dog's Farm" and it's a kind of sort of a – I just had like a week, because everyone was so distraught that Mad Dog left and so I thought, well, it is almost like the highlights' package, but then what I've done, and you'll notice when you get there is, I've actually ended the Mad Dog's string I have not left it open, so that he can come back the next book.

I have closed it on that last night, when they have a big party in the bush and . . . but anyway, back to my process. I then came back and I said to Penguin [the publishers], "Right, right, when do you want to publish this? When do you need the final draft? When do you need my first draft?" And suddenly it was like okay, now I have got a process. I came back in March. They said to me, "By end of October, can we have a look?" It's like a first draft. A rough first draft and then, January, we are looking at sort of a third draft and that is okay for me, because at least I felt, I cleared the decks and I felt I could do this and I did. I did not miss a single deadline. I felt like it was actually very comfortable, because there is also a danger of having too much time, because then I obsess and I overdo it and I want to keep that sort of that rawness in there, so that it does feel like a boy's diary and it is not just this perfectly manicured text and that is why, I mean, the 'Penguins' [he is referring to Penguin publishers] if they feel there's too many errors (and there are too many errors in this new book and you will come across a few) and I said, "You know what? It doesn't worry me so much, because it is 'Spud's diary,' you know, so –

MM: What kind of errors, spelling, grammar, continuity?

JVDR: Typos, ja, a couple of typos, the odd continuity. I mean, we have picked up quite a few. They are about to go to reprint now, so they will change them, but it still doesn't bother me that much. I think, if it wasn't a boy's diary, it would bother me a hell of a lot and obviously, you know, you do not want those ideally, but –

MM: So it could be part of style, in a way.

JVDR: Well, ja. I mean, you can see, obviously, in some places, it's an error, if it's a typo, but, it just keeps it – I suppose, that lively sense about it. So that was the process this time

and it was a much better process and I think I am probably going to follow that, so I think, I have now found – well, particularly for *Spud*; I think, my writing, thereafter, might change again, but, um, for the final *Spud*, I think I am going to do a similar thing, where I am going to take the rest of this year off. I am thinking of maybe moving down here

MM: Happiness for the Cape!

JVDR: I do not know about that, and then we'll see, I, but I think, probably early next year, once again, start it up again and then, I imagine, 2011 will be the fourth and final one, you know, and then I am getting out, while it is . . .

MM: So it's become kind of structured for you and you like the structure. It is nice for you to know a little bit more of where you stand from the first one.

JVDR: I think so, yes, I think so. I'm not a big structure person, but it certainly helps. What also happens with the Penguins for example, is that they'll, if it is all sort of up in the air, they suddenly surprise you, like they will turn around and go, 'We really need this book', or like, 'We need to go to print in May' and you're like, 'What, when did that come out?' And like even this year, they tried to do that. Like I said, 'Okay, end of March I will finish' and booked my flight for the 31st of March to Malaysia.

MM: We tried to meet then. Ja.

JVDR: Yes, yes, because I did not want to hang around. I wanted to finish it and go,

JVDR: But then suddenly on about the 18th of March, they were saying, 'Can we have all your things by like Tuesday', which was like the 21st of March. I'm like, 'No, no, no, no. I need those last eight days.'

MM: So a panic tactic to get you to commit, or?

JVDR: No, I think, they suddenly feel a bit rushed for time. Now, what I do, I almost sort of get a written agreement of this is how it is going to be, and very structured, so that I know, that they can't suddenly jump me with some sort of . . .

MM: . . . Weird deadline.

JVDR: Ja, and they're weird like that. They do that and they seemingly forget that we had a very tight plan, but it is also pleasing for me to feel like I hit all my deadlines, even though some of them were not quite stringent, but I certainly feel like, because I have done that, possibly I have earned their trust, they trust the fact that when I say, "I will get this done", that it is going to get done. So that's been the process.

MM: And having had that break that you had – what's interesting is that you said – that whole thing you did on masculinity – do you feel it's percolated over the years and then when you took a bit of a break after the first one, it was able to kind of distil in some way?

JVDR: You know what, it is very funny, because I think that all that study on masculinity and doing the thesis and spending all that time on reading, as you know, so many books around the subject. I mean, I can't even remember any of them now, but you know, I mean, I go back to my thesis and I'm like, '*What*? It's a lot of reading I did!' But I do. I think, it's just . . . it forms that bedrock and obviously, I do not write with a theoretical sort of underpinning work, because I know that is sort of death for commercial, if you are commercial, writing a commercial book, or a book that – any book I think, if you, but I can see it already. Like I catch myself, when I see one of these guys walking around like this [he

demonstrates what he describes in *Learning to Fly* as 'carrying two surfboards under each arm'] and I just go, 'Ooh, hyper-masculinity!' And then I catch myself like. I feel like I am an observer of masculine behaviour and I am far more, I think, comfortable with women than I am with men, because I don't trust the masculine edge or the brutality of masculinity and the insecurity of masculinity and the constant striving to prove itself . It provides, I think, most of the evil and its work and it comes from the ego and it comes from that, or the lack of ego or the ego trying to prove itself all the time.

MM: It's kind of a sublimated, I do not know, sort of a primal urge to dominate in a way, that comes out.

JVDR: That's it.

MM: In someone like Rambo and so on.

JVDR: That's it, that's it.

MM: You get a guy like Spud and I'm just skim-reading little bits of the new one, but just to get a little idea about both.

[exchange with waitress]

MM: Sorry, but I noticed that – what was it? Boggo called in that little diary bit, because I liked the structures [While this sentence is very unclear, I was referring to my copy of *Learning to fly* and the part where Boggo has made his own entry in Spud's diary, and Vern has done some drawings]. I sort of flipped through and I saw that little bit by Boggo was very interesting and the Verne pictures and I saw he called Spud a lesbian which is hilarious, because a woman who is too masculine gets called a lesbian very often

JVDR: Yes, yes. Yes, yes.

MM: A kind of clichéd labelling and he calls [him a lesbian] . . . so Spud is a masculine woman

JVDR: Yes, the sportswoman and all that. Ja, ja. Exactly.

MM: ...And it does not make any sense, actually and he confronts it as a result

JVDR: I know, but I mean Boggo has always called Spud a lesbian and I think he is there, but Boggo is also the kind of maniac who probably tells people that Spud is a lesbian. I mean, I do not know, but that's how he explains Spud coming right with a few pretty girls like the Mermaid and Amanda, because he has to justify it and, but once again we are getting back to the ego and it's about the personal axe Boggo has to grind with Spud, because he is this ineffectual – or what he sees is ineffectual - pre-pubescent boy. He seems to be scoring girls and he has got to somehow give a reason for that to justify it to his own ego and all the rest. But yes, that is an example, where, if somebody calls you a lesbian and you are a boy at school, it's something that can actually (depending on who you are) can actually work on your brain. And it can actually make you deeply unhappy and be hurtful.

MM: But it does not just attack your masculinity, it attacks your sexuality as well.

JVDR: Exactly, exactly. Ja, I know.

MM: Despite being very funny, as you say, at the same time.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: It is amusing on a shallow level, but on a deeper level.

JVDR: Ja, it's interesting you picked that up, ja, but certainly.

MM: How do you . . . Do you ever go back to Michaelhouse or write in to say, do any sort of research like that?

JVDR: Yes.

MM: Because you also write in Vietnam and places?

JVDR: Yes. You know, research not so much in terms of… but I will tell you an interesting story, by the way . . . but research, not so much, because I feel like if I closed my eyes . . . I spent five years there . . . I *know* where everything is, but also a sense of if it's not there, I can make it up. And a lot of stuff I've sort of embellished. What I do is, I meet my editor, Allison Lowry, who is also the CEO of Penguin. We meet at Granny Mouse's Country House which is three kilometres down the road [from Michaelhouse]. We stay there for two days and we generally meet there before I begin writing, so before I went overseas, we met there and I just bounced around. We spoke in very general terms. We will sometimes go to Michaelhouse and just walk around, but not to really look at anything. We'll walk along the fields and we'll just chat about the book and just soak up that ambience, because so much of that place is that, soaking up that ambiance, trying to reflect that unique character that you get, when you walk through a school like that and it's the birds and it just feels old and this building is almost sort of leaning down on you like that, We obviously had a very big meeting there after the first draft, because, when I finished the first draft, I went off to the Kalahari with Julia to kind of escape and just camped under the stars to become one with the animalistic in me, or whatever. Also I did not want to be hanging around home, constantly texting her, saying, "What do you think? What do you think? What do you think?" and all that insecurity. I hate, I despise my own sense of insecurity, but we all have it, you know. So then we came back and we had like a couple of days there, where we just, we dug and basically spoke about everything. But there was this funny thing. We were in a lounge like this, chatting before dinner and I was talking about Rambo and how I felt like his lead is so vital in terms of this growth development. The fact that quite early in the book Rambo basically says this Crazy Eight thing – he is not interested. It is childish. That is the reason why he buggered up last year, because there are cretins in this group and he[101] is going alone basically, you know . . . So he shatters that whole sense of, you know, the eight, the Crazy Eight , that is quite carefully crafted in the first two books and I felt that was really important. Then suddenly, we heard the great piping voice of this woman going, 'Oo, Rambo, now he is the bad one who had the thing with the teacher!' And we turn around and it was like this whole room had turned their chairs. And they were all just listening to us. And I was giving away all the secrets of the new book! So and Allison leans across and says, 'Kid, we have got to find ourselves a new hotel.'

MM: I've just met my uncle Don MacRobert. Actually all my husband's family, not my husband himself, but their family, were all old boys of Michaelhouse long ago,

JVDR: Oh, my word!

MM: So they are all now in their '70s . . .

[101] The pronouns were changed from first person to 'he' here as it was clear in the recording that Van de Ruit was using direct speech from Rambo's perspective, but in the transcript this is very unclear.

JVDR: Oh!

MM: But apparently there were massive debates about whether it is physically possible to climb from the chapel window into the school. So they're old boys of the school –

JVDR: Oh yes, I can imagine, yes.

MM: having great discussions about it.

JVDR: They don't let those little things go, hey? Everything has to . . .

MM: Do you worry about the detail, when you are writing? I mean, do you technically work out, whether it is possible to do x or y or is the story the king?

JVDR: Well, I did that night swim route. That was our night swim route. I know that can be done and then I did it for *Carte Blanche* two years ago. They did a feature and I went through the window, and they followed me out.

MM: Oh, no!

JVDR: And then it was like, okay, you go through this window and I was like, I nearly got stuck like Fatty and I am going, 'Gee, this is a lot thinner than I remember it. No wonder Fatty got stuck!', but you can. And I did the whole route, too, you know, all the way to the dam to prove that it can be done

MM: Which Carte Blanche was that?

JVDR: It was round the launch of *The Madness Continues,* so it would have been two years ago, in 2005. I'm sure if you google it, it will come up, the exact date, but it was 2005.

MM: I'm a terrible TV watcher, so I must pick up from somebody -

JVDR: I only watched it, because I was in it. Do not worry, I don't usually watch *Carte Blanche* either.

MM: That sounds fascinating. So they actually made you go and . . .

JVDR: It was a little bit cheesy and they had a sort of enactment of boys sort of running, and then interviews with me, in my – in Spud's – in the dormitory, and so forth. But it does at least give you a sort of an insight into what it looks like in the chapel and so forth, and I take them on a night swim and that is probably the best part, down through into the crypt . . .

MM: Brilliant

JVDR: Ja, well maybe one day I will take you on the journey, yes

MM: ... I was going to say . . .

JVDR: Take you on a tour.

MM: Because what I, I'd like to, I know, the autobiographical questions . . . . Presumably you went to Michaelhouse?

JVDR: Yes.

MM: Okay, you did go to Michaelhouse?

JVDR: Yes.

MM: You are an actor?

JVDR: Yes

MM: And so there are lots of things that must be bits of you. What are the problems, like just technically, while you are writing? What are the problems of autographical material? You know, do you feel it is difficult covering your footprints, making it something that is not just a memoir, or a . . .

JVDR: Not really, you know. Interestingly enough, it happened quite organically. It's funny and it is quite a weird thing, because people always ask me, "Are you Spud?" And I understand why they ask that, because when you read that book, you want to know, is this all true? It's the first thing you think and when I read any book, I, you know, unless it's completely fictional, like a great espionage story involving the KGB or whatever, which I don't usually read anyway, then you don't really think that, but if you have got some guy talking about walking to the South Pole, you want to know if he did that (walk to the South Pole) and obviously they see I went to Michaelhouse, so they assume it's about Michaelhouse and they make a lot of assumptions.

But certainly, I started writing the first book from an autobiographical perspective, but I wasn't trying to write a memoir at all and I was very aware from the start. For example, Fatty didn't exist. Gecko never existed. Mad Dog was the nickname of a guy who was there, but in a different house and three years older than me and more a sort of mythical kind of character, The Rambo guy was sort of based on a sort of guy in our dormitory, but I have embellished all those characters to the point where *Spud*, yes, may have started from my recollection of it, but I also battle to tell the truth in real life.

You must understand, that if I'm re-telling about the story, I am probably going to embellish it hugely, because that is the way I do it, because I feel like there is true North and then there is like magnetic north or Van de Ruit north which, sort of, it runs parallel and I think a lot of that sort of absurd humour is that the slight, the slightly different take on something, but it is very close to the original. So it's true north and magnetic north.

MM: The story is more important than the truth perhaps? In this case

JVDR: Yes. Exactly and I then became very comfortable immediately, being able to incorporate things that happened to me. I mean, I played Oliver. I had my balls polished on my birthday, which was hugely traumatic.

MM: Birthdays in private schools are horrible

JVDR: I know. I know. My first birthday there, hey, and just traumatic. I was so homesick and then I got dragged out of bed by my twiggy balls in the middle of the night and at midnight. Just, you know, that kind of stuff, but I could draw that in and then just embellish it. You know, a guy like Vern – we had a guy who pulled his hair out and he was a bit of an oddball, but certainly I have now taken Vern to such an extreme position.

Ja, so it's very much mix and match, but if you consider that say, Fatty and Gecko never existed: so much revolves around those two guys in the first book, that that in a way it renders everything fiction, you know. But then, if you look at the signposts like, for example, my

grandmother is quite similar to Wombat, so a lot of those stories are verbatim – the yogurt theft and all that kind of stuff is pretty much there. But she did! [in response to my laughter]. She used to think that the supervisor's stealing her yogurt and she used to call the police and do weird things. My parents are hugely embellished. I have taken that sort of. My dad has got sort of a high energy and, yes, they enjoy a drink, but they are not really alcoholics, but there was always a class differential between my parents and me and the other boys of Michaelhouse. Yet, they drove a good car. They did not have a station wagon, but they would still get there and have a skottel braai and have the booze flowing and the teachers always used to come and sit with them, because they so much nicer than the sort of snooty parents having a picnic with their . . .

MM: And the teachers would be of a similar sort of class?

JVDR: Of course, of course and half of them were these old Zimbos [Zimbabweans], because the headmaster was an old Zimbo at the time, so they were quite sort of down-to-earth, so my mother would sit there with her sundress on and her big glasses and you know, get pickled in the corner, but it wasn't quite as embarrassing as the Milton station wagon

MM: Yes.

JVDR: and the craziness of Spud's dad. My father, particularly, has been a very good sport about it: he actually signed twenty-five books at the launch last Tuesday and all these people lined up and he got interviewed by the *Weekender* as well!

MM: You captured a generation there as well in terms of, you know, the English not-so-liberal liberal, kind of, you know

JVDR: Well, of course, yes.

MM: It's a very honest take on a lot of stuff that gets said by, well, to be honest, by a lot of white people behind closed doors

JVDR: Ja, ja. Exactly and I wanted to give that, because I mean, certainly I have huge ding-dong battles with my father about politics. I mean, he still has controversial politics for my liking, but you know, you call him conservative. I would not call him racist. I mean, there is certainly racism there, but it is not a radical kind of – but it is certainly a conservative politics that tends to look on the dim side of everything. You know, nothing gives him greater pleasure than to go on about how South Africa is going to the dogs and I mean, what is the *point* of speaking like this, you know? What is the point? What does it actually do? It's just misery.

MM: Yes.

JVDR: So, any way. But I am really getting hot under the collar. He calls me a 'liberal' and I am 'brainwashed' and I am a 'communist' and all sorts of stuff.

MM: Don't worry. A lot of people of our generation had that – I think my husband got called a 'pinko-liberal' by his dad once – I mean what *is* that?

.

JVDR: Ja, 'pinko', yes, and obviously, now, it has become like a, a joke now, so he always says, 'It has been infiltrated by commies,' and you know my dad – Spud's dad – so that becomes like a gag, but also because I have satirized Spud's dad in such a way that he actually does not come across as . . . I mean, even black people would love Spud's dad because he has got that sort of disaster-prone kind of thing about him, where he is actually a complete goon.

MM: But you've managed to make them, you've exaggerated them and yet, they're natural. They are not just caricatures. They are three dimensional as well.

JVDR: Yes. I think that is the point. I think, wherever I write, you may start from a stereotype or imagining somebody as a sort of type, but then it is the carving. For example, Rambo is the stereotypical, big 'heavy', you know. But he is actually a much more interesting guy than just a 'heavy'. He is actually, he's a very intelligent person for one. He is not just the big rugby player. He is devious, but he is a great mimic and he has got a sense of humour and he is highly attractive. I mean, girls, I think, generally love Rambo and I think of the many girls if you said, if you have to take one of the Crazy Eight home, who would you choose? They would choose Rambo.

MM: Ja.

JVDR: Yes. I mean.

MM: It's typical, ja, eh.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: Did you have any idea about an audience? You said that you had an idea of audiences. Did you ever realise or imagine even that your audience might be adolescent as well? Were you writing it from . . . ? Because a lot of the humour is laughing at adolescents, in a way.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: and [the narrative implies], 'I am an adult now and I realize how silly a lot of it was.' Whereas a lot of adolescents are now reading it, because it is about adolescence and the teachers are prescribing it to them and it's coming down [from adults to teenagers], but now it is coming up again as well: the kids are enjoying it. Did you ever imagine that kids might read it, or that they might get something out of it or?

JVDR: Well, I thought, you know what, to be honest, I did not give it much thought. Before it got published, I did not give it that too much thought, but what I was hoping for, I thought it could be a cult book, because I knew it was funny and I thought, well somebody . . .

MM: Like *Catcher in the rye*? [This is mentioned in the first *Spud*].

JVDR: Yes, yes, yes, but even on a smaller scale in South Africa: they could sell like ten thousand copies, maybe, with a following from boarding school people and I thought, kids at boarding schools or . . .

MM: Who went . . .

JVDR: Yes, but particularly kids like going through it, but really, it is an adult book which is weird, because when it was being released in the UK and America in both the teen market and I and my publishers thought that was a grave error, because I think there is just so much that teenagers miss. They do not get the satire of being a teenager. Those things which Spud does, like, for example, Julian, in the first book, photographing their naked bums and the whole sort of overtly gay camp thing: he just doesn't see it, you know. It just goes straight over. And I think a lot of thirteen-year-old boys wouldn't get that. Whereas, as an adult reading it, you are going, 'Oh my God!'

MM: I know, you are going, 'Julian's just a little bit excited.'

JVDR: Exactly and chasing another guy with a fly swatter and squealing and obviously, I am having a joke and I am having a wink at . . . and I do that fairly often. I have a little wink at you and say, 'You know what we are talking about here?' You know, so, yes, I mean, I really didn't think it was going to catch on like it did in schools, because I thought, perhaps, it was [over their heads]. It is also about reflection and it's a book about that sort of . . . I suppose, we think about REM's *Night swimming* which came out in '92 and was probably the most evocative album of our –

MM: generation.

JVDR: Era, ja. And it came out when we were at school and that was profound, because night swimming was already a thing we did and when we heard that song (and I have actually brought it into this book, that moment), when we heard that song it felt like somebody was talking to us, that our experience, our world, was being told. But there is obviously a great melancholy there, where you leave school and you hear *Night swimming*. . . . I remember swimming in the dam and I remember being at Midmar [a dam in Kwazulu Natal where the Midmar Mile swimming race is held, in which many schools compete] and holding a girl's hand and going for a swim in the evening and at a party, you know, all that jumping into the water.

MM: Well, that group sense that you have at school.

JVDR: Yes, and it's incredibly evocative. You know, 'every street light' [lyrics from *Night swimming*] and I think, probably that might be a little quote in *Spud*, at the front of the book, 'Every street light a reminder of night swimming', a kind of sense of looking back and I suppose, harking back to your youth. I think people construe often that I am harking back to Michaelhouse and I wish I were there, but it's not. It's more the youth and the simplicity and how big everything felt then there, even the smallest things and all that stuff, where you look back and you think, "I know more now although I know less.' Back then, I felt so sure in a weird way about things that now I don't feel so sure about and it is all that. So it's sort of the way you remember things and like the way I remembered Michaelhouse. I mean, I had some terrible times there and some great times, but then I still have this funny glow that I have often tried to work through, because I am so ambivalent about the school. I have this ambivalence and ironically, in my old age, those bad things have just slipped away, or seem unimportant, but I remember how much they scarred me when I was there and how much the brutality got me down, not so much the physical violence, but the emotional violence, the constant put-downs, the constant ripping-off that was always under the guise of having a joke or a laugh or sending you up, but it just eventually wore you down.

MM: Oh, absolutely.

JVDR: And it's those small, small little slingshots. Those little slingshots that eventually will almost crush you, you know, crush your spirit. It's not some guy coming and beating you up or trying to drown you or shoving your head in a toilet. I mean, those are terrible events, but –

MM: It's pretty traumatic.

JVDR: Ja, but you know, but it was also a different time and you must remember that, like I think, a lot of people think that is probably what school is like now and it's not. I mean, that was when corporal punishment was everything - 'boy management' and prefects were allowed to thrash you.

MM: With planks and hockey sticks.

JVDR: With planks and hockey sticks.

MM: Well, I didn't go to a boarding school, but I had a lot of friends and boyfriends at boys' boarding schools as well and knew about it; they used to hit each other with sawn-off hockey sticks and things, and you thought, "What?" you know . . .

JVDR: Ja.

MM: It's quite a heavy thing.

JVDR: You know . . .

MM: There is strong sense of soundtrack, though in the book, generally hymns as well.

JVDR: Ja.

MM: That beautiful song they sing at Gecko's funeral.

JVDR: *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*, ja.

MM: If you don't know the hymn, it must be harder to get. I do not know how someone gets the emotional impact. It's such – 'the still, small voice of calm / Breathe through the earthquake, wind and fire' [words of this hymn].

JVDR: Ja.

MM: And that line of the song is such a soaring bit. How did you decide when to put in songs, or did they come to you while you were writing or did you deliberately say, 'We need a song here'?

JVDR: You know, it is so funny, when I wrote Gecko's death, I had a song by James, the band James – I can't remember what it was called, but I just went, 'That is the song.' I write sometimes to music, but what I do is, I put it on repeat, so the final night swim in this book was inspired by them hearing REM's *Night swimming* coming through a window in the quad and then racing. Rambo races up and he basically steals the CD and they go and listen to it over and over and that inspires that final night swim and it happened perfectly, because that was when the thing was released, right at the end of the year and I had to wait till the end of the year to do it, but it was well worth the wait. I certainly feel that in my brain is a soundtrack . . . . If I close my eyes now and I just almost hear it; it can be the chapel bells, it can be the organ from inside the chapel playing a hymn or the choir singing inside the chapel. It can be the cooing of the rock pigeons when you hear nothing else and just that afternoon where it is quiet and you are sitting outside there and soaking up the winter sun, because you are freezing and you just hear like a 'coo coo' of the Cape turtledoves; and other times it's music coming through windows and it's . . . then there's also the soundtracks of your REM or U2. All that stuff that I think is a very important epoch, in, not only in South African history (which was huge) but also, the Berlin Wall coming down, in a sense, the end of communism and the sort of opening up of the world. The technology starting to come through. Computers and it is just a . . . I think, that '90 to '95 was just a massive time to be South African and to be anywhere. So, yes, I do. I have. I don't necessarily write always to music, but when I am trying to find an emotional quotient, and I then recognise a song, I will play that song sometimes over and over for three days and I actually went into a depression after I finished the first book, because of that Gecko death and everything . . . and it was so weird because it wasn't real, but I was weeping, when I was writing.

MM: But that death was . . .

JVDR: I know, but I also chose, I think, in a way, to underplay the death in a weird way. When he dies, there is no big 'snot en trane.' He's almost quite distanced from it and he goes away and he cries, but then I allow it to have slow poison all the way to the end of the book, so even when he is on that final hill, you know he thinking about his friend. And I think – just the whole process of it – I do not know what happened to me, but I stopped. I could not leave my flat after I had finished that first book. And eventually, after about three, four weeks, I, literally, I did not go anywhere and then I went to the doctor and I said, 'I don't know what's happened to me. I've got no energy. I'm feeling listless and exhausted and I think I've got bilharzia.' So they took all sorts of blood tests and urine samples and everything and she came back with all the tests and she said, 'You are absolutely fine. Have you considered the idea that you might be depressed? Has something happened in your life?' She said, 'Has somebody died?'

MM: Was it a sense that you'd lived with that character for so long and then you kill them off, so that you felt he'd actually really died?

JVDR: I think so and I think also it was that first book. It is a hugely powerful experience writing a book and particularly a book like that and I put my all into it, you know, into that book. I mean, it was everything and I think, when I got to the end too, it was like, perhaps like, I, well, I'll never know what childbirth's like, but for me, writing a book is like giving birth. It is almost like an equivalent time. It is like a year out of your life and the burden gets heavier and heavier as you go on and then afterwards, there is this weird sense of that you're separated. Like when I went overseas, that is why I wanted to go overseas, because you just go 'coom!' [he made a collapsing noise and gesture here], I'm going to like try and let it go and for like at least a month, I didn't think about it at all – well, tried not to and every time I did, I'd throw it out of my mind, and that is why when people say, 'When is the fourth?' it's like, 'God, you want to get me pregnant already?' You know? But, ja, it certainly did have a huge effect on me at the end of that first book and I think, I did go into some sort of depression and I think, it was Gecko-related, but also just, I think those three or four days writing from Gecko's death to the end: it took me about five days in that first draft to write them, with that head song going over and over and very, very powerful stuff. It was a weird thing and I, when I think about it now, I think, 'Well, no wonder that people get moved by it', because *I* was – I poured everything into that and I am generally a very happy guy. I am not a depressive dude at all, I'm generally an up guy. Ja, that did give me a shack, hey!

MM: It's such a contrast to the humour and the lightness of some of the moments and then, ja, it is always such a joke when Gecko gets hurt and then he actually goes and dies.

JVDR: Ja.

MM: He really dies. It is a bit of a like, 'Oh, gosh!' you know

JVDR: Ja.

MM: But that soundtrack of the whole book is very strong. Did you sing yourself?

JVDR: That's right.

MM: Because you sound like someone who has that, who knows the emotion you get from singing.

JVDR: Ja, I actually had a brilliant voice before it broke and I was actually asked to go to the Drakensberg Boys' Choir, which I turned down, because I love my cricket and my dad was like, 'I don't think so. Not my boy. Not on my watch.' You know . . . .

MM: That would be the end of masculine . . .

JVDR: But ja, ja, exactly, but I had a great soprano voice and so all that, "Oliver" and singing the solo, that was all true, but ja, but in a way because my voice broke so late, I mean, *really* late. I was nearly in standard nine when it started breaking, which was excruciatingly late if you're in an all-boys' boarding school, where there are boys who are two years younger than you shaving in the morning and you arrive, you know, arrive for your shower, the insecurity. So it was such a double-edged sword for me, having a beautiful voice, but in a school like Michaelhouse, having a beautiful, soprano voice at 15, is not helpful.

MM: No. It is a bit of a curse

JVDR: The only thing with playing Oliver was that then I got into the girls, the first time that girls had ever taken any notice of me, so that was an amazing moment and it gave me this short-lived spate of status in the school, but that disappeared pretty quickly after [the play] had finished.

MM: You get that sense of it in the book very well, that there's this spike of, who you know, suddenly he is so cool, whatever and liked, because he's special.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And then the 'special' must disappear very quickly.

JVDR: Dissipates quickly and you go back to being nothing, "yeah".

MM: Do you still get that feeling now of being a writer and you get moments of being special and then it crashes as well?

JVDR: Ja, you know, now, but, now I feel like it. The specialness is almost just too intoxicatingly overwhelming – that, that I quite enjoy. I enjoy most being me out of, you know, the wonderful anonymity of being a writer, is that even here nobody knows me, but…

MM: What about that John van de Ruit?

JVDR: Not too loud!

MM: To be honest, a lot of people . . . .

JVDR: Well, that's it. The moment my name comes up, then suddenly everyone's saying, like, 'Oh, yes, I loved that book.'

MM: Although, even with names, a lot of people are saying, 'Who?'

JVDR: Yes

MM: If I say out of context and you'll say, 'Well, the guy who wrote Spud' then it's 'Oh, *that* one!'

JVDR: Yes, exactly.

MM: John van de Ruit, because John's a common name and Van de Ruit doesn't sound like that -

JVDR: Yes.

MM: There are a lot of Van De somethings in South Africa. And if people aren't sort of in book circles and South African people – don't generally read . . . .

JVDR: No, they do not.

MM: especially not fiction.

JVDR: No, no, they do not.

MM: You were amazing in that sense, to become a household name

JVDR: I know and it's so strange, hey, I mean, it's so strange, but ja as I say, it's the kind of thing outside of these book tours, where I feel famous for like two months non-stop and I am in these amazing hotels and I get driven around in limos and all sorts of stuff. You know, it's kind of like, 'Wow, wow, wow!' But I'm getting used to it now. Like I'm thinking, 'Well, I couldn't do the City Lodge now.' You know, once you have had the taste for it, you couldn't regress, you know.

MM: I know, ja.

JVDR: Because you just get used to the comfort and being able to pick up the phone and order your dinner and do whatever you want, you know, but anyway

What happens to me outside is that I, I tend to have these long periods, where I just – I eventually just go back into being me and there are two mes in a way. Like I do feel that, because the real me does not take myself that seriously. There is a laughter going on. I am laughing at myself almost and almost laughing at the people who think, I am so – this, this dude and these people are kind of terrified and they're trying to take pictures and their hands are shaking and you know, like, 'Do you realise I wrote this book in my underpants?' You know and I walk around singing and talking rubbish and . . . you know what I mean? But they don't. They sort of, they think that - I don't know how they think. They think I'm in a swivel chair in a lighthouse somewhere, you know, writing this, but the point is, I am just a normal guy. But it is to reconcile those two – this author John van de Ruit guy and just Johnny, who is for a lot of people, just a goon and I am the goon.

I mean, there is the goon in me, but I suppose I'm a goon with a serious soul in a way, but it's those moments like that are so priceless, but are also cringey, when you go somewhere, like you were going to a braai, and you're chatting to relative strangers round a braai and you're all sitting there and you are chatting about rugby and then somebody goes, 'Oh, John, what do you do for a living?' and you're like, 'Oh, I am a writer.' 'A writer?' 'Ja.' 'What do you write, hey?' So I go, 'Books.' 'Books? Gee, what books have you written?' So like you go, 'Well, do you read books?' 'No, I don't read books.' So he goes, 'Well, what have you written?' He goes, 'What? *Spud*?' and then suddenly everyone is coming around and then 20 English teachers pop out from the trees and go, 'Won't you come to my school and talk to my kids?' And you are like, 'Ja, sure. . . . Just let me get another beer,' like, "Phooh!" [he gestures running away]. But that is what happens, I feel anonymous, and then suddenly, when my name comes out, then it becomes a big thing or then everybody starts like acting weird. Up until then, everyone is chatting and I can talk rugby with the guy. But then everyone is going to look at me going, 'Geez! Hey! So you wrote that book, hey! I've never read it, but okes say it's great, hey.'

MM: Ja, you've never read it.

JVDR: Hell. “Hey, so you wrote that, hey?" And then you feel like ja, ja, ja. Then you feel, you know . . .

MM: Ja. Depressive.

JVDR: Because people are weird about it, you know. If they think you’re like some sort of a celebrity, or they look at you differently, you know, as if they think you are a bit of a freak, you know.

MM: Ja and there's quite a big status or difference between being like a lesser-known actor, somebody who's done drama, a Masters, and people are going, ‘So, what are you going to do with that? You know, ‘How are you going to make a living?’ And now you are a writer, who *is* making a living.

JVDR: Ja, three sixty [degrees, i.e. a complete turn around], hey, it's total . . .

MM: Do you mind, if I ask a little silly questions along the line of -?

JVDR: No, go for it.

MM: Things, little things that I need to know.

JVDR: So you reckon your machine will be picking this all up, hey?

MM: Ja, no, it should do – it’s a very snazzy one my supervisor loaned me, but it tunes into you, you can block out other noises and . . .

JVDR: Oh, wow.

MM: and even bracelets jangling and that sort of thing.

JVDR: Oh, wow, okay!

MM: and you can slow it down, so that you sound . . .

JVDR: ‘I sell’– [putting on a slow voice]

MM: So that the typist can get it right.

JVDR: Okay

MM: Your English teacher - Spud's English teacher, Guv – he gives him lots of books to read. Now I was quite interested in that you give these very frank, adolescent critiques of a lot of them – *The Diary of Adrian Mole* springs to mind. Were you influenced by *The Diary of Adrian Mole*? I mean, the humour in it reminds me and especially, the parents, actually remind me an awful lot of . . .

JVDR: Yes. Yes, slightly, sort of, the middle class slightly loose around the edges.

MM: Ja, and them saying, Spud is not picking up what is really happening with his parents ninety percent of the time, but the reader can pick it up by inference from the – and Spud’s drawing false conclusions about what is going on.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: You know, there are these little question marks in brackets every now and then like, you know, you can tell Spud's going 'huh?' and the parents are, you know . . .

JVDR: Yes, yes, yes. Ja, I know what you mean,

MM: Were you influenced by it – like, did you read it at the time, or . . . ?

JVDR: Yes, yes, I read it as a teenager and I really enjoyed it. I thought, they were very funny and I suppose, a lot of people do draw a similarity, because it is a diary and I knew, they would, and that is why I referenced it.

MM: And *Spud* says at one point that it's a woman talking

JVDR: He does. Yes, he gives himself that quiz, when he goes on his birthday, he does this, he is preparing for fame. He is going to have to answer the 20 questions, so he answers all his favourite things and he goes, 'Worst book ever: *Adrian Mole*, any diary written by a woman. He would not last ten minutes in our dormitory. By the way, I still loved it.' or whatever: But I did that, I mean that is the academic in me. I knew, anticipated, that if anybody ever read this, there would be comparisons, but I have been quite pleasantly surprised that in a way . . . that perhaps, because Adrian Mole is now sort of quite a long way away, but also, it's a very different book when you get down to it. I mean, the diary is the same, but obviously Adrian is very self-obsessed. So it's all about his life. Whereas Spud is almost a narrator figure. Particularly in the first book. He just watches everything that is going on and writes this story. Um . . . but . . . yes.

MM: Comparisons are more sort of style-wise?

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And it's a pleasant comparison – it's enjoyable

JVDR: Yes and some of the humour, like the way I will shift, and that is definitely inspired by Sue Townsend - the way I'll shift from writing normal past tense to the present tense, bullet form, eleven o one (11:01), dad goes here. Eleven o two (11:02), dad du. . .du. . . du. . . . Eleven o three (11:03), dad drinks his third beer of the morning. Eleven o seven (11:07). That is very much influenced by Sue Townsend. That sort of structural comedic style and you have got to be careful where you use it. I am very aware that I do not want to overdo it, but it certainly is a wonderful – I use it for Fatty getting stuck in the chapel and . . . like I usually identify my big comic set pieces and then do them in present time and it is also a nice break from the daily routine diary sort of style, but yes, definitely, it was an influence and . . .

MM: Did you sort of . . . . Were you remembering having read it, or did you read it again while you were writing?

JVDR: No, I refused to read it, because I knew that I would start aping, because I am a terrible mimic, so I actually don't read anything when I am writing.

MM: No? Margie Orford says the same!

JVDR: Because even if I read like Wilbur Smith, well, I mean, heaven forbid! But I would start probably aping something that he has done as a character or whatever, so if I do read, I will tend to read non-fiction, and then, obviously, when we went overseas, it was just like, "Oh, my God, I can read again!" You know, wow, wonderful!

MM: Ja, I've heard that from a few people I've interviewed. Margie also says that she only reads non-fiction

JVDR: Ja, it's tricky.

MM: And that also can't . . .

JVDR: So I was tempted to, but then I said, 'No, do not do it.' Because I knew, because that was always my worry, in a sense, that people are going to go, 'Oh, it's a kind of South African *Adrian Mole*' – I knew instinctively that it was different to *Adrian Mole*, although on the surface there's a strong similarity.

MM: It is interesting and I am glad you did move consciously into a South African time - You also bring in things like *Catcher in the Rye*, e.e. cummings and the namesake, John Milton. How did you come up with that name, John Milton? Was it as a reference to *Paradise Lost?*

JVDR: Well, you know, it was so funny, ja, like the name, 'Spud', came quite quickly, like right at the beginning and then I liked the idea of him being named after a great, but now, a fairly obscure classic writer. I mean, you don't ever see people reading John Milton's *Paradise Lost.* But I loved the whole *Paradise Lost* thing and then it was obviously a direct linking to the Guv, because I thought, why would the Guv in that first English class pull him out, and it's purely on his name. He goes, 'John Milton. I'm interested in you and are you . . ' and then he sees that this boy's, you know, got a facility for English and is actually quite a clever lad, but also quite a soulful lad and a little bit lost, and I think there begins the most key relationship in all the books

MM: It pulls the book into the world of being able to – in a boys' boarding school comedy with all the issues of bullying and all that – it actually introduces literature into it and all these lovely, little commentaries about what this boy isn't always seeing in the literature and what he loves and what he doesn't . . .

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: Which makes him an unusual boy in some ways

JVDR: Yes.

MM: But also, was that a deliberate choice that you had your Guv . . .

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And that was your entry into discussing . . .

JVDR: I think, it was a quite a deliberate choice, but I mean, , you know, sometimes names just arrive and then you just go, "That's it!" and other times, you go, "Hmmmmm, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know . . . " but like, for example, in this book, I've got a character called "Garlic" and again, I just immediately knew this guy – his surname is Garlic and his nickname is Garlic [Yes], and that was perfect. He's a Malawian called Garlic and it just sat perfectly. When you read him, you will see, I mean, he is the height of stupid, ignorance. Let's say ignorance and naivety, but also quite a sweet fellow and well-meaning and over-enthusiastic, but entirely irritating, with this love for Lake Malawi . . . . And those names, they just sort of pop in, just like the Guv popped in! It just felt so right.

MM: He's not real? He is someone you invented, or . . . ?

JVDR: Well, he was inspired by a teacher I had for my first year, but I never had a relationship with him and there was no . . . he didn't give me all the books stuff [as the Guv gives books to Spud], but he was this crazy man. He'd walk in and kick the door down and swear like a trooper and threaten to shoot people in the head and there was a rumour that he brought a shotgun to school like ten or five years before and threatened some guy with a gun, but I just obviously took that and [Ja] and just ran with it. [Yes] And then obviously, he forges this wonderful relationship with this . . . the wonderful idea is that he is exactly irreverent. He is the height of irreverence. He does not give a shit about anything, but he is well-loved and somehow, the school just sort of puts up with this maniac. You know, he walks across the quad and shouts and raps on the vicar's door and drinks like a fish and you know, he is just, he is just an exceptional, extreme character and you know, I think, quite often, Michaelhouse does cough up every couple of years, a teacher like that, because these guys go quietly crazy, living in that valley. They have no outlet and they drink like fishes. I mean, a lot of them are – have sort of, have drinking problems, because what else do you do there? I wouldn't drink like a fish . . .

MM: And teaching – alcoholism is apparently one of the most common problems with teachers, so . . .

JVDR: Exactly.

MM: I understand.

JVDR: And it is also nice, because it gave him a weakness. He is not just the sort of all-consuming, powerful whatever. His Achilles heel is his drinking and that tragedy of Spud, seeing him drinking and getting drunk and his wife and the collapse of his marriage, and Spud almost becoming like such an important . . . more important to him than he to the boy, or the balance almost being righted. Whereas at the start, he needs the Guv and he is so desperately homesick and miserable. The Guv's almost the only thing that keeps him going, you know.

MM: Ja, and there is also that wonderful sense of, you know, the adult needing the child

JVDR: Yes, and that is so sad, when you see that, like . . .

MM: But hard on the child. It puts a lot of pressure on him.

JVDR: Yes, it does.

MM: So he realises.

JVDR: Poor old Spuddie. He has a lot on his shoulders and his parents too are . . . it's a difficult thing – his Grandmother, and then just insane people. Like having Vern sleeping next to him for like two years. I mean, it must have been *incredibly* hard for the poor lad.

MM: We had a teacher who used to come to school in her slippers and my mother said once, you know, it's amazing children survive school, with the rather bizarre adults who get kind of paraded past them and they actually – this is their idea of what they have got to become and join into!

JVDR: Ja, ja, absolutely, ja.

MM: Are the adult characters also quite useful for bringing adult issues into a boy's world?

JVDR: I think, so, yes. I would definitely agree with that, because I liked that idea of – I sometimes get frustrated that I've got to tell my story through the voice of a 15, 13 to 17-year-old boy, you know.

MM: But you can only understand so much.

MM: Yes, and that is why I've made him incredibly bright and a scholarship kid, so that I can cheat. Whereas if I was retelling my life, I was nowhere near that place. I was nowhere near that advanced, I was very immature for my age. You know, I wouldn't have been sitting there reading and stuff. I would have been you know, playing ping-pong against the wall with somebody, or, you know, waiting for the tuck-shop to open, or whatever. Playing, "Stingers" on the field or just something stupid, but in a way that is the way I would have loved to have been, you know: Spud, in many ways, he is almost me reliving my life and being able to sort of revisit how I wish that life had been for me. I wish I had had a mentor figure. I wish somebody had introduced me to literature at 13.

MM: Was it a longing to be in the Dead Poet's society at that time? You mentioned those movies earlier

JVDR: Ja.

MM: And that feeling, 'I wish I were in that guy's class,' kind of?

JVDR: Yes, I think to a certain degree, longing for that inspirational teacher that never came, to be honest, until Varsity, and a lot of Spud is drawn from my University years - a lot of the relationships, a lot of the complexities of girls, and I have drawn from my university years and then put it into Spud, but the funny thing, when I look back, is that, maybe, in a 100 years' time, once I'm dead, if Spud is still read, people are going to believe that those are my memoirs! In a way that I have almost rewritten my life and although I've told everyone it's fiction, eventually it will go down as my experience, as time goes by!

MM: People will remember Spud, then.

JVDR: They'll go, "We must read this. It's about a boy who went to Michaelhouse and it's based on this guy's experience."

MM: Because they'll remember John Milton, rather than John van de Ruit

JVDR: Ja, they will. But I mean still, that's okay. I mean, I feel that, as a creator, what better thing to do than to create a character that outlives you? I think is almost . . .

MM: Who you think is better than you? Well, there you are. You've made yourself a new life.

JVDR: Ja, ja, and I mean, that's what, that's what I do for a living. So, for me, the fact that Spud is more famous than I am, gives me nothing but a thrill.

MM: So you've had two things that you've done in a way. You've on the one hand, perhaps, transcended the traumatic experiences of the past by writing about them.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And on the other hand, you created a better world than the one you lived

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: because you're a better person in the book than perhaps you were in real life

JVDR: Absolutely, absolutely and I've certainly, in some way, recreated a world as it was then, but in a very sort of manic heightened state, like the whole thing goes along at quite a madcap rate. You know, when you read it, it just, it feels like you are getting onto a conveyor belt and you have to literally jump off to, you know, put it down, because it is . . .

JVDR: You know, it's a kind of a – it just, like I say – it's that, once again, it's that magnetic north, true north, where you just . . . it just runs a little bit faster than . . . the world spins a little bit faster than it should, or something like that, ja.

MM: A little bit like in a film, even if they film it in real time and it's a slow art movie, because they're fitting six weeks into three hours, they must cut all the, you know . . .

JVDR: And that creates a sort of . . .

MM: The bits where you scratch your nose and . . .

JVDR: Yes, exactly, and that creates, because the honest truth is, when I remember boarding school, I remember the boredom, I remember the banality, and I remember my greatest memory is just sitting around in the afternoons, when I wasn't doing sport, just talking shit or just drinking tea and like reading a magazine and just waiting and just sitting there staring into space, which obviously is not part of Spud's world at all, but I remember the time I wasted at school, almost winding down the clock, counting down to the holidays, you know.

MM: Or that . . .

JVDR: Ja, ja and just almost never being in that moment and going, 'What can I do in this moment?'

MM: Yes.

JVDR: Because at a school like that, you've got so many options, if you want to take them, so many facilities and societies and things you can do and different sports and the library. I just never really kind of bit my teeth into any of it and that's one of my regrets, so what I have done with Spud is, I've allowed him to sink his teeth in. So now everybody thinks that was my life, but unfortunately, mine was far more banal.

MM: Yes, I think that is part of fiction, isn't it?

JVDR: Ja.

MM: It's making the world more interesting, or better, perhaps?

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And people who read it also live a more exciting teenage life. Nicky Daly – I don't know if you know him, he writes, and illustrates kids' books.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: He said that he remembers childhood, he remembers the ages that he writes for, at very early primary school really, really well, but he says, he cannot remember anything from about – I think he said the age of eight – until he was about twenty-three, when he woke up again.

JVDR: Really, hey?

MM: ... He remembers those years and that's really why he writes.

JVDR: Ja.

MM: And Roald Dahl says he remembers very clearly what it's like to be a child and that is why he writes, and children like it, because he gets their perspective, their sense of justice and you get that same quality: when I read it, it transports me back and I can actually, I didn't know any, well, I did know some people at Michaelhouse , but very, very vaguely, but I knew the Pretoria and Jo'burg schools and it's just very like my brother and my brother's friends and my, you know, school boyfriends and so on.

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: Do you have that sense that that time in your life is a time that you remember more clearly than any other time? Do you remember primary school as well? Could you write John Milton in Grade 3?

JVDR: No. I mean, I do have some recollections, but I think that the time at Michaelhouse stood out for me in terms of my youth, because it was such a – and it happened so quickly. I was never meant to go there, because in the last three months before I ever went there, everything happened. I got this bursary and I wrote the exams and suddenly, I was buying school uniforms and it was almost like I got caught in a wave; I never ever remember making an active decision to go there, which is almost like life decided for me. I don't believe in coincidences and I have stopped believing in coincidences because it makes life more interesting when you don't. It does, it makes you feel that then therefore, you are somehow connected with . . . and when I think about that, I go wow! You know, that was probably why I got that sports bursary, because that's what tilted it. If I had not got that, I do not know if I would have [gone to Michaelhouse] and the irony now is that I don't play sports at all, and it was probably the worst money ever spent!

MM: Well, for *that* purpose, but obviously the potential works for something else.

JVDR: Yes, exactly.

MM: Well, let me have a look at some other . . . . You have got quite clear goals it seems with writing style and you said, you like shift to the present tense for comic moments and I notice, especially in this last one, just from flipping, that you use scripting every now and then, where you actually to get in dialogue, which is unusual in a diary, but it works because you act, so it's a natural way . . . . How do you make those decisions for yourself?

JVDR: Yes. You know what it is? It's quite an instinctive thing, but I certainly have now set up with Amanda. When he sees Amanda it almost goes into film script and that is because I started that in the first book and I think it's a nice thing to carry on and even in this new book, he has one meeting with Amanda and once again, we go into film scripts and I think, it is his fantasy, you know. He sees her almost as, like Julia Roberts, obviously, but then there is another instance where I go into play script, which is with Red Tape, who is the sanatorium assistant, the bureaucratic san assistant guy who's always – he's just one of this nasty dudes who enjoys other people's pain and not helping them, but then that is a deliberate comic kind of thing and then I use it one other time, where Boggo returns in the new book, from the playhouse when all these hot actresses arrive. They have done this sexy play, but they haven't been allowed to go to it – it's only for matrics, and so Boggo has skulked off and he's come back with a rose and said that he has got it stuck into this hot 23-year-old , who kissed him

like, with a tongue that could strangle a boa constrictor, and she gave him this rose and then on the rose – it's like attached – it says like, "Best of luck, from Peter Scholtz". So he is obviously, but then Rambo basically shoots holes in the story and I do that, sort of, but generally I also like to break it up and sometimes it's a list, you know like the holiday score cards and reasons why I should not be with Christine and it breaks up the eye, whereas just that day upon day of diary writing for me, so I am very conscious of that and I think, that is what happens when we start feeling more commanding with the genre and I certainly do feel that. I feel this sort of diary journal writing style now, like I have no fears going into the fourth book now, none at all.

MM: So, very confident?

JVDR: Yes and I feel very confident. I feel like I own the medium in a way – and I can dance.

MM: Because it could be a very uncomfortable genre if you were forced into this one person's perspective for the entire book . . . .

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: Everything must happen through his eyes and . . .

JVDR: Exactly.

MM: The flashbacks have to be realistic, so that he can describe things he didn't see that were reported to him by other people.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: Is that something that developed in your first book? Did you find it really awkward to deal with?

JVDR: The first book was more, just, organic. Obviously, I feel very comfortable also writing play scripts, because that is what I learnt. So I mean, that is my whole stock and trade. It's my training, like being a plumber, you know, so I wanted to bring that in and I thought, well, work to my strengths too, and also I didn't know whether people would read play scripts, but it seems to like be quite easy to read. You have Amanda and what she says and people just go with it.

MM: It's dialogue in an easy form, isn't it?

JVDR: Exactly, exactly and it's also nice, because then, if you were to write that two-page dialogue, it would take a lot longer and that's actually harder to write that than a play script.

MM: And you have to think of different ways of saying, "She said, he said."

JVDR: Exactly. Now this time around there is far more direct speech:, most people won't notice, but it's probably quadrupled, the direct speech, compared to the previous books, but not in plays, just in normal . . . . So I could now embrace that this time and so every time I feel, I am, I feel like I am dancing more with the medium and taking more risks. Also in the knowledge that you can't really go far wrong. As long as it reads and if it doesn't, then I just chop it out. I mean, for example, the first draft is 155 000 words and this has ended at 110, so I mean, I have chopped out nearly a third of the book in that, you know, there is nothing precious. I put out as much as I can in that first draft. I over-write it and then, file away, and that's the part I love, the editing process. It always takes five or six drafts sometimes and I

mean, it took six months and, but I love that, because you sit down and you've got something to work with, as opposed to having to getting it all out. But when I get it all out, I try and write far too much, so that I can then . . . but chopping it away, just chopping out huge extracts and chunks, gives me great pleasure.

MM: You actually enjoy that process – that 'killing your babies' part [this is a reference to advice I had heard about having to be ruthless in making cuts]. That's wonderful!

JVDR: Ja

MM: Was it harder in the beginning? Did you?

JVDR: No, not really. You know what; I have always been totally unprecious about my own writing. They are words. It is like Lego blocks and you are building a huge thing. I think the great problem with many writers, is they are so precious about their work and they won't give over. You know, when my editor says, "I do not like this," I go, "Fine, it's gone, boom". It means nothing.

MM: At what stage does your editor come in? You said that they ask for a rough draft quite early?

JVDR: Yes.

MM: Do they start poking around then, or do they just say, 'Okay, well done, you're on track' and leave you alone?

JVDR: Well, you know, Alison Lowry has become now more than just an editor. She has almost become like the mother of Spud and she has become my – she has become my sounding board so I bring her in when I feel I need to. But generally, at the end of the first draft, is when she gives me the big feedback; but I do sometimes give her, say, 25 000 words and say, 'This is the start.'

MM: Almost a synopsis.

JVDR: She doesn't say much then. When I am writing, she just goes, 'Keep going, kid, you are looking great.' Whatever, and I know that it's not great yet, but I know, she is . . .

MM: So she starts off as cheerleader and then only later on starts with the paring

JVDR: Yes and then I think, she is most important towards the end of that first draft, because I've then got a huge whack of words, you know, a huge manuscript, that's as rough as a rhino's backside -it literally is and then she helps me, because you know, you also lose that objectivity. And I think, a number of writers . . . I do not know how these writers do it without sort of a figure on the outside, and I know some do, but she certainly gives me that perspective and she'll go . . . and I can just see by her notes. She doesn't even have to, she doesn't, she is a very subtle woman. She has that very dark sense of humour. But you know, for example, I wrote this whole Romeo section that turned out to be erroneous, but when I first wrote it, it was quite a major plot line and when I looked at her notes, I mean, I had about twenty pages of notes, after that first draft, I reckon about 60 or 70 per cent were about this plot line. She'll say, 'This is still not working for me here. I suggest you've got to try and fix this'; or 'Why is Spud doing this? Why would Pike be getting involved now? Blah, blah, blah'; and then like, 'Why mention this here, five pages later? and then you can see it, you can just go, 'Well, do we really need this?' and she goes, 'You know what? I don't think I would really miss it if it wasn't there. It's, for me, it's problematic.' So then I go, 'Fine, it's gone.' So then I go and I chop say 15 to 20 000 words out, because I've got to cut and then

fix – band-aid the holes –so it is really like making sausages and I know, most people think it is quite a - I mean, I am not sure of you, but most people, I think, think it's quite a romantic process, where I finish it and it's fully-formed and don't see it's like making sausages. So at the end it looks like a perfect sausage, but my word, I have had my blooming sleeves up and I, you know, ja!

MM: Blood and guts everywhere!

JVDR: Exactly, chopping, pulling things out of here, cutting and pasting, I mean, it's like a construction site for a long time.

MM: It's a wonderful thing you've just said, because this is why I'm doing the study. There's very little understanding - people don't – they don't want the romance ruined. They want to think that you sit in a lighthouse somewhere.

JVDR: Yes, of course, they do.

MM: And that it's all this divine inspiration.

JVDR: And they don't believe you when you tell them this. They just go, 'Huh, huh, huh, ja, ja.'

MM: Ja, ja, but like not believing.

JVDR: Now sign my books, please.

MM: Yes, exactly, and of course, you're really Spud and you're just covering . . .

JVDR: Exactly, exactly.

MM: You don't want to be sued!

JVDR: Exactly, exactly, you don't want to be sued, yes, yes. They always ask me that. "Has anyone ever sued you?"

MM: It's everyone's fear in writing a book about their own lives – will they get sued.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: You do a lot of the chopping as you go along. How much planning do you do in the beginning? And what kind of planning tools do you use? I mean, for example, do you use storyboard as if it's a play from start to finish? What kind of stuff did you do in the beginning in *Learning to Fly*?

JVDR: Well, I think *Learning to Fly* is the best example, because it's the most thorough planning process I've had. So let's use that as the template, but what I did is I filled, - I mean, I packed it full of stuff, but I also did things like, I wrote down "Boggo is the driver for this book" and I always just knew that, and I held onto that and you will see now, he is the driver. He is the comic. He is the comic spark every time

MM: He even gets a voice, which is wonderful.

JVDR: Exactly, that's why I gave him that voice, because I felt like and what a thrill to write from another boy after three books, to suddenly just have, albeit a page, and you will see he sounds different to Spud. He sounds completely different. He has got a different turn of

phrase. He has got a – but he still writes quite cleverly. He has got a sort of, he's got that wit. You know, almost finding, I then did some weird things, where I could put down every character and I – [we order drinks from the waiter so the thread of this conversation is lost but the thread is picked up below – he was probably referring to his 'comic quotient' for each character].

JVDR: Are we getting through it, or are you feeling like you've still got millions of questions?

MM: No, no.

JVDR: Okay.

MM: You're answering stuff as you go along and sometimes you answer things I didn't think of asking.

JVDR: Shame, if you transcribe this, it's going to be terrifying.

MM: Not personally – I pay someone else because –

JVDR: A good move for this.

MM: – I end up with about 70 pages from each interview

JVDR: I'm a great rambler. Now what were we talking about again?

MM: We were talking about your planning process and you said that for this book you're much more structured, Boggo is the driving . . .

JVDR: Yes, yes. So then like I did some weird things while I was in Vietnam. I wrote out every single character and I gave them a comic quotient out of 10, just to give *me* an idea of *who* I want to be driving the comic. I gave them all a quotient. For example, Vern is very high in *The Madness Continues*. I mean, he is off the charts in terms of his nuttiness and I felt like I want to draw him back, but he obviously, whenever I need to just, he's almost like my punch line so often. Like Fatty said this, Rambo said that, always going in threes, and Vern pulled out some hair and picked his nose, or . . .

MM: Vern always tips the scales from slightly mad, to absolutely loony, lunatic, ja.

JVDR: Yes, yes, exactly, exactly, yes. So yes, the planning process: I got quite structured this time. What I do is I basically separate all my notes into Term 1, Term 2, Term 3, Term 4, but in a *very* sort of [loose way?]. I don't stick to that necessarily, but I just give myself an idea of what I'm looking for. Then I'll take Term 1 and I'll try to think it through and this time, I wanted to use a Shakespearian five-act structure, but in a very loose manner. I mean, great students of Shakespeare will probably pick it apart, but certainly before it's been much more of a . . . a sort of just . . . it all just flows, and this time I've really, I've worked at five acts with the varying intersecting plots coming together to a week of big explosions at the end and it goes "bang, bang, bang, bang" at the end, "boom, boom, boom", setting up obviously my major thrust in Act 1, the big climax end of Act 2, Act 4, which Shakespeare often does, is to take it off into another realm and I've taken them off to the girls' school, so just like that shadow stuff. So I thought a lot about that, but I haven't got too obsessed with that idea.

MM: Did you draw it out, or sketch it in any way?

JVDR: Yes

MM: So it's just some acts, did you draw little boxes or you know?

JVDR: Yes, well what I did, so then I sort of thought, "Okay, well my first act ends for example at the end of the first term," and so I looked really at that first term, chose what elements I wanted from the big pool of ideas, threw things in there and then what I do is then go, "Okay first week, I'll write, 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday' and I have a space under each one. So I'll go, "Monday - set up Milton's car trip back to school, arrival, set up Garlic, weekend score card and set up Pike". So I'll have all that on a Monday. Now it's very difficult to start, because I've got so much to do and you'll see, I don't mind the slow start, but it has got – it sort of ambles along in this book, because there's a lot I have to set up at the beginning. New characters, Pike is a prefect, blah, blah, blah. I'm sorry, I'm giving a lot of things away.

MM: That's fine. You're sort of dangling your hook.

JVDR: Yes, but certainly a lot of things I had to – and like Shakespeare does, he's very unhurried setting up his Scene 1, Scene 2, Scene 3, but in a general week I will have say, Monday, "Lunch with Guv." Then I'll have Friday, 'Conflict with Pike after lights out.' Saturday I'll have a cricket match and then I'll think, well okay, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Now if the Friday conflict is going to be a big conflict, then I don't want to go long story, long story, long story. I'm very aware of the rhythm. So I'll go 'ratta-tat-tat', so a short little something for Tuesday, maybe nothing for Wednesday and then set up the Pike thing maybe in a subtle way, like Rambo at dinner, says, "Okay, tomorrow night we're going to do something." So that sets it up. So I have already set it up. The audience knows, the reader knows it's coming. Then we get to Friday, I have my big explosion. Saturday, then it obviously depends on how Friday works , because that leads onto Saturday, but obviously when I'm writing, things jump in all the time, but I'm very aware of the rhythm, so I don't like having a big story and then when I want the rhythm to go, like you will see, the first week takes about 50 pages just about in the book, because there's so much I've got to set up and there's spiralling cricket fortunes in this book now, with him being dropped from various sides and blah, blah, blah. Then I'm very, I get the sense that I almost get anxious. I go, "Come on, come on, we've got to go now, we've got to go", so then I start going a much shorter, "bang, bang, bang."

MM: You pace has to pick up?

JVDR: Yes, exactly. Go, let the week start rolling and when you go in those short ones, the reader starts going and the more suddenly they go, "Oh my word, I'm on page 63 and I, you know, I've been reading for like two hours and I'm already like 20% through the book", or whatever ,and then the reader loves that thought, that they know that they're sort of getting into it.

MM: So you considering the reader at this point and the effect you're having on them?

JVDR: Yes, but I see the reader more like an audience and you'll often hear me saying the audience – I mean the reader. And that's what I do. I sit there at my desk and I get into a kind of, I get into that Spud feeling. I almost become like a Method Writer and my legs go [he jiggled his leg up and down as if very excited] and feel like, like, quite often Julia will say, "Do you want some coffee?" and I'll be like, "Hey?" and it's like, "Arrrgh,, oh I'm sorry, carry on," and I just go. Ja and I'm almost like imagining I'm on stage, performing this for an audience and in theatre, you can't drop the ball. I think writers are so used to dropping the ball. They feel they can just zone out for pages and pages and waffle on about some minor point like a flower, or a sunrise or Karoo landscape and they have *no* idea that people don't . . .

MM: (laughing) Lesley Beake also said "Karoo landscape" when she was making a similar point. Sorry, I just . . .

JVDR: But they do, they *love* that Karoo landscape!

[Conversation with waiter]

JVDR: So I do, I'm still an actor at heart and instinctively, I *feel* it all. So I feel it. I feel that I don't sort of sit there, aloof, writing. I'm very much involved and it's almost quite a physical manifestation of the writing that I experience.

MM: How much – you're talking – I've heard the set-up with the three people for the three things, for a gag and a comic. . . . How much training have you had in terms of writing and so on, because in your drama, I know they have cabaret courses and things I didn't know existed when I signed up for varsity. . . . How much training have you had with these kind of things? or?

JVDR: You know, obviously I had Drama and Performance. You learn the basics, but I mean, the fact that most people study Drama and become English teachers means that it doesn't guarantee . . . ., anything, you know it doesn't. It equips you for a generic kind of BA Drama, you know. You're also doing other subjects. It's not like you're at Drama school

MM: Did it help, though?

JVDR: Without doubt, my comic university was five years on the road doing, Ben and I, satirical theatre with a box of props, an audience of 200 every night. We pulled in the crowds, just him and me with a . . . on a bare stage with two chairs and we would make people howl with laughter for an hour and a half on good nights. On a bad night . . . .

MM: Was it scripted first, or?

JVDR: No, ja, *very* tightly scripted, and originally I drove that scripting process and Ben's a genius on stage too. I played, I was very much the straight man, but in terms of the writing I'm the kind of wild . . . he's the edgy kind of guy and I bring the sort of . . . the sort of more absurd, but slightly sort of charming, you know, the "draw you in" kind of feel, but you know, from performing.

MM: I think, disarming.

JVDR: Performing all over – yes –, all over the country from like the Barnyard in Mpumalanga to

MM: I know the Barnyard in Nelspruit, I lived there.

JVDR: Ja in Nelspruit, in White River, I mean, with the shows there, we did the Magoebaskloof, we were like, everywhere: the Baxter from Jo'burg to Durban to school halls to church halls. We just performed everywhere. We performed on a field once and generally, we had such a high hit rate, but we put a lot of pressure on ourselves. It wasn't just a gag and we were very professional, never missed a gig, – we would always arrive an hour before, we would have physical warm-ups, vocal warm-ups, we were *very* professional and I think people got a very good product with those *Mamba* things, you know and, and certainly for me, that was comic university, because it's all about rhythms and timing. It is all about rhythms and time and when you're writing, it's *exactly* the same, it's exactly the same.

For example, you see I work in threes, but every now and again I'll go, okay, I know they get that, the audience will be used to that rhythm of three, so I'm going to go rhythm of four. So I'm going to go, instead of going "da-dank, da-dank, tssch", I'm going to go, "da-dank, da-dank, da-dank, pom!" and then they go and sometimes you just dance with that and I'll play with that. You'll see when quite often when I use Verne, Verne's often the "Tssch" [he was using the drum-beat and cymbals noises associated with circus or slapstick comedy, where the punch line is always emphasized with a crash of the cymbals], so I'll go, "Fatty, Boggo, Vern", or "Fatty, Boggo, Garlic" and it's yes, those three, obviously jokes always go in three, that is, that is a law and it works, but not all my jokes are in three and you'll see there's various different comedic shifts I use from slapstick to farce, to wit, to wordplay, to juxtaposition. There's so many different comic methods, but I'm obviously not rationally going, "Okay, here I'm going to use this method", but I just feel almost instinctively, I tend towards whatever the situation demands, a certain kind of thing and sometimes it's just the one that comes to my mind first, and I always feel, follow your gut. I'm a big one on follow your gut and don't over-analyze it and obviously *Spud* is a nice thing to do, because I'm not writing a thriller or a detective story where there are unravelling plots, where you've got to be very cranial about what you release at what point, etc, etc. If I release too much early, then quite often I'll then undermine that by making it turn in a different direction, but instinctively, if I'm getting bored then I feel the audience is getting bored. If I'm getting tired of a plot line, then I feel the audience is getting – I mean, the reader is getting – tired of it and instinctively, if I feel it's funny, I have now learnt to trust that it probably is funny.

MM: Well, I suppose with the stage, with theatre acting, you can't fake the audience's interest as an author can, ja, can as you say, you never know if people enjoy it, or are bored by it. Whereas a theatre actor, you see people's faces are starting to look at their watches and look out the window and that sort of thing and you know, "I've lost them and I've got to get them" and you know that buzz you get from when everyone's following you.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: So do you think a lot of these skills are also become sort of automated, they're starting to run in your veins?

JVDR: I think so, but in a way, I think comedy is a bit of a high wire act. Whether you're doing it, whether you telling a joke around the braai or whether you are writing it, or whether you're on stage as an actor performing it, or whether you're a standard comedian – it's a high wire act, because there's no middle ground. It either is funny or it isn't, and obviously writing a book, you don't know in that moment, because you don't get to see or watch people reading, which I wish I did. I wish I could be a fly on the wall and see whether they laughed, and that fascinates me. It's so funny when people go, "Oh my God, your book cracked me up. That story with" – and, like, they'll have some random story that I didn't even think was particularly funny, you know.

MM: The stuff that you've used, you've used these different layers of humour, is probably one of the keys to your success, because South Africans, I think on the whole are quite slapstick. It's a bit of a complaint people have as theatre producers

JVDR: Yes.

MM: People don't get the wit and yet there is something there for the university literature student who –

JVDR: Of course.

MM: – Knows e.e. cummings and the spelling issues.

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: And laughs at that thing about, “Enjoy this, but don’t you dare try imitating it!”

JVDR: Yes. And the Guv’s brilliant in the way that he’ll talk, you know, you're quoting Shakespeare here and there, yes.

MM: And he enjoys the depth of John Milton and the real author versus the adolescent John Milton –

JVDR: Yes.

MM: – Who’s bright but at the same time can’t possibly be measured – you know, he feels he has to measure it up. So I think you get the variety of humour and then you get a lot of it – ’cause I think different people will laugh at different bits quite a lot and you’ve got slapstick, but you haven’t only got slapstick.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: There’s a lot of sort of, sort of gross sex, teenage boy type of humour.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And then you know . . .

JVDR: Fatty’s farting and all that, yes.

MM: You're just going to laugh because the guy – it's toilet humour – you're going to laugh at the business cards and you know . . . or shopping and then there's where you're going to – laugh –

JVDR: Yeah, exactly, exactly and I suppose it's to find that balance. Because you know, I went sometimes with Fatty's farting and stuff like that and I know . . . and Alison, I mean, she is the CEO of Penguins. . . She was constantly pushing me. She was like, “Where’s Fatty’s farting this time?” And I'm like, “Come on, he’s in Std. 9 now. Surely he's moving on.” No we’ve got to have at least three. So then I go, ”Okay, three is all you're getting.”

MM: Actually negotiating the fart question!

JVDR: Exactly, but now my mother, for example, for her fart jokes are the funniest things ever. If I give her a fart card and they're quite hard to find – for her birthday, I mean she just rolls about laughing. She’s got a university degree as a teacher and whatever and whatever and it's weird and sometimes and it doesn’t have to be funny. You just mention a fart and she’ll just fall about laughing. You know that kind of thing, which is so weird.

MM: I suppose it's your upbringing. You've got to find farts shocking, they're going to be a little bit amusing

JVDR: Well, exactly.

MM: It's like “Tee hee hee, he’s farted!”

JVDR: I know.

MM: As opposed to "Everyone does it, let's let rip."

JVDR: Yes, yes, ja, ja, interesting.

MM: You've answered so much, it's fantastic. Oh ja, I wanted to ask about this. I think one of the reasons your books have an appeal apart from the fun – I mean, there are very few really funny books by South African writers. . . .

JVDR: Ja, ja.

MM: But you also tackle those deeper underlying issues that you spoke about early, about the undercurrent running through.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: I mean, you've got the issues of racism and massacres going on and the, I think very interesting, the generation who, you know, the white generation who benefited from apartheid, but weren't in charge . . .

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And that sense of what was our perspective and – I was a matric '94 – and you know, what was our perspective on what the hell was going on?

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: And caught between several generations and in the politics, but not old enough to vote, or do anything about anything.

JVDR: Yes, exactly, yes.

MM: When you're writing how do you juggle the fact that you've got these issues and you know, you want to be funny, but you don't, you want to hide the plumbing, you want it to be part of the story and be seamless and so on.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: How do you set about that? How do you cover your tracks?

JVDR: Well, it's a little hit and miss you know. I sometimes feel that . . . like in this book as well – I mean, obviously, in '92 there was the referendum, the last white referendum which was a big moment. There was the World Cup Cricket which was big for cricket fans, but also was powerful because it was our first –

MM: Toss up for South Africa.

JVDR: Ja, but also I mean . . . Spud's dad has a great line there where he ends up voting "Yes" after saying he is going to vote "No", but he makes it very clear he's voting for Jonty Rhodes, not for the Commies, you know!

MM: I think for a lot of South Africans that's pretty much the choice for sport versus politics.

JVDR: Exactly and the ANC was so clever about it, because they knew that was our Achilles' heel, we all were desperately wanting to see us play sport!

MM: I didn't know that. I was completely unaware of the cricket,

JVDR: Yes.

MM: Absolutely. I mean, I didn't know that was an issue.

JVDR: I was so, I bunked the Hilton-Michael House [a big-deal traditional clash of the two KwaZulu-Natal private boy's schools in rugby] to watch the first All Blacks-South Africa test match, because that was very important to me.

JVDR: Yes, and then the other thing was Boipatong, like the Boipatong Massacre. I mentioned that in this book and it's quite hard in a sense to leave it and it is a bit of a jarring juxtaposition but my feeling is that I remember back to that time where I was very aware of Chris Hani's death, or you know of those big events that were happening – Boipatong, Bishu – and I obviously do quite a bit of research - you know, I read various political/socio books and then I decide which events . . . I look at, I surf the Net and I look for "movie releases" and "music releases" and then obviously, choose what I want to use, and it also helps to keep that authentic feel that it's happening in that moment. So it's not just like, "Oh wow, I remember Boipatong, it hurts me like yesterday". You know, you've got to make sure that Boipatong wasn't '91 or '93. You know, you've got to get it right, but then yes, you do leave for dead, but what I do feel is that – that there was, well, the reality at the time was, we were all shocked by these things. Remember that church killing in Cape Town where they bombed, where they shot people in the Anglican Church. They were shocking events, but when you're a teenager at school, they almost weirdly . . . that event means as much as being dropped from a cricket team, or being promoted to a cricket team, and that's always the weirdness of youth and I suppose there is a part of me that was happy to risk people thinking that I'm really just over-simplifying some very big issues and not tackling them, with the idea that everything in Spud's life, whether he's humiliated and he's bog-washed or his balls are polished, within two days he is sort of over it and moves on. So obviously, Lennox for me is a very important character, because Lennox drives the . . . he is the political-social conscience of the book and he inspires with the AA meetings, which have now become quite dodgy, because there are only two people in this society. One of whom is Spud and one's Rambo, but Rambo just arrives, just to, like, take the piss, basically.

MM: That's got to be lovely.

JVDR: Exactly.

MM: Because he's just so irreverent, ja.

JVDR: Ja, exactly. So yes, I do feel that in a way I'm oversimplifying, but I also feel that it's quite authentic for a boy at the time, even a boy who is quite politically sussed as such, to – more politically sussed than anybody else in the Crazy Eight. His, it's an *emotional* response. His response to Mandela in that first book is emotional. His response to Luthuli is . . . he sees Luthuli as a sort of . . . his grip on Mandela, that Mandela is like a . . . is a big Luthuli, if you like, and it's quite narrow.

MM: It's typical and there's the psychology, though

JVDR: Obviously, it's quite frustrating for me, because those are topics that really interest me. I'm *very* interested in politics and our history and so on, so forth, but I also at the same time will never write a political book about The Struggle or about the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission], or whatever, because that's just death. I mean, it's just death, a lead balloon! You know, I mean, let's face it, it's a lead balloon and, so, yes, it is an uneasy mix. I think I'd probably get away with it, but also I feel like I quite often am educating these

kids about what happened in a weird way. For some kids this is probably all they know about that time. They read it in *Spud* and they are like "Geez, it was *bad* back then, hey?" You know, people were buying like tins of tuna and stashing away in their garages in case the big day came when the great "Swart Gevaar" [in the language of Apartheid propaganda, there was talk of black people taking over government as 'the black danger" or of communists as "Die Rooi Gevaar" – "the red danger"], you know, came through and I mean . . .

MM: All the uncertainty.

JVDR: Crazy stuff, ja.

MM: I also think it's very authentic, because it's a teenage perspective, but I think it's typical of adults too. We have the xenophobia, we all have a panic, we all watch whether we've got our passports or not, and whether we're safe and all the burning happening next door, or not, and we're all worried, "This is it". Because I think in South African there is often that feeling of, "This is it, This is it! This is the end!"

JVDR: There were a lot of "This is it" moments, yes, ja.

MM: Ja and then we'd always be excited afterwards and then we forget that we were so very worried.

JVDR: I know.

MM: Before this recent election we all had a huge panic again, was it all going to . . .

JVDR: Zuma is going to . . . ja.

MM: And here we are, you know.

JVDR: Nothing's changed, everything ticks along.

MM: Everything's fine; here we are in a lovely hotel sipping wine!

JVDR: Exactly, exactly.

MM: I think this is – and also from a teenage perspective – I think you know, my memory of being a teenager, as well, is why your book has got that truth. You do go from "Gosh, the Boipatong Massacre" to "Oh my God, those people!" through to, you know, "Ooh, check out the boobs on that porn picture!" That is the young – I think it's the adult mind as well. . . . I think our concentration span is very short.

JVDR: Yes, and also that those horrible comments that now seem so shattering, where like the Dad goes, "Well, as long as the blacks are killing each other and not killing us, that's fine" . . . you know.

MM: Ja, well, that again is very real.

JVDR: And you like kind of go, "Ah, gee", you know, but people somehow gloss over a lot of that stuff, and I feel quite often people go like, you know . . . . Because I've just been in Jo'burg where the whole Parktown Boys' High – I don't know if you've been following that whole bullying – and it's gone to court now. These boys were initiated -

MM: Oh no, that's supposed to be illegal now.

JVDR: - by Matrics and they had to rub Deep Heat on their genitals and then they got beaten. But now this has ended up in court, because the headmaster didn't really go on it and some shirty mother has gone, "My boy was brutalized."

MM: And the attitude is often, "Oh well, boys will be boys"

JVDR: Yes, but now the point is that you read *Spud*: what goes on in there is probably worse than that. But somehow because it's covered in this charming sort of veneer and everyone – I mean these little kids that read a book – all go, "Oh, we want to go to Michaelhouse", you know. Michaelhouse has got a waiting list, like it's the best thing that's ever happened and they even do *Spud* tours. You know, they bus these kids up and show them Spud's dormitory and they all want to know where Spud slept and that. I mean, that's what these little boys . . . that's their reference point, you know, they've read the book and now . . .

MM: Well it's adventurous, because you left out all the boring slow bits.

JVDR: *Exactly.*

MM: It's so exciting

JVDR: So now I feel terrible and all these kids are going there under a false . . . so they're all going, "You know, my son went to Michaelhouse, because of *Spud*" and I go like, "Oh, my God," and she goes, "No-no, he loves it, he loves it!"

MM: Well, maybe they feel they're living the dream. I mean, how many of us? Like you say, they want to go to the school where they had *Dead Poet's Society* – it's not as if it was . . .

JVDR: Yes, exactly.

MM: It was a great . . . it sounds like it was a horrible school and the only highlight was this brief moment with this wonderful teacher.

JVDR: Ja, ja.

MM: And it was particular individuals and a particular time

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: Wonderful. While you're writing, do things turn out more or less as you planned originally, or do they tend to take over from you and go off on tangents you hadn't expected?

JVDR: No they go off on a lot of tangents. Generally, I know the big, the big plots; I mean, very seldom madness continues. I'll tell you something interesting and I should have told this earlier when I was talking about process. I went to Michaelhouse to do a talk and sign books and after I had signed books, I was walking back down the driveway to my car and these boys ran, "Sir, Sir, Sir have you got like 15 minutes? We would like to show you something." So I say, like, "Alright." So they go, "Come, come, come," and they led me down, over the bog stream into the bushes and they took me to this lair that had just been busted and it was called "the Pimps Paradise" and these guys had couches there. It was a big dope-smoking thing and it had just gone up, literally up in smoke, that week before. They had all been smoking dope and the teacher had been running with the dog and smelt it and then went and bust them and they had a fridge there; they'd turned this thing into a den really. . .

MM: That's the *style*.

JVDR: Yes but that gave me the idea for the Madhouse. I mean, literally, before that there was no Madhouse and suddenly, I was driving home and I was just like mad, I think this is it! This is a sign and nothing's coincidence really, there are no coincidences!

MM: But that's very *Dead Poets' Society*

JVDR: *Exactly*. So, for example, I was already well into the process of writing *The Madhouse*, but it suddenly gave me that central thematic pull of *The madness continues* which was the Madhouse and then the break-up of the Madhouse and the shattering of the Crazy Eight, as we know it, with Mad Dog being expelled and Rambo being expelled, but then Rambo coming back after sort of suing, you know, as he always does.

MM: Those dodgy financial things that happen in private schools as well, ja.

JVDR: He's such a dark bastard, exactly, ja. Rambo's uncle works for *Carte Blanche,* I mean, it was some story.

MM: The parents always pay people off

JVDR: Exactly, they do, they do, but anyway, that was an interesting scenario where reality shifted completely – the, well, the experience shifted completely; but generally I go on many tangents. Sometimes I don't even have a note and then I'll just pick up on something and run with it and I always know, the wonderful thing is that I know that I can run this thing as far as it goes and if it doesn't work, I can just chop it out. Because in a diary you can, you can just chop out and you can cut and paste. You know, I can take something from the first term and take it word for word and just paste it in the fourth term, and suddenly I go, "Actually, that reads *much* better there. Oh, well that's nice" – and I just do a little blending in paragraph – a few set up things like, "Wednesday – looking forward to this, the week before that we've got to do this". . . And it's weird, because you always work backwards then, , so it can be such a scrambled process.

MM: Is it really nice having a diary, because you got the front and the school year, because it's nice – its January to December.

JVDR: Exactly.

MM: You've got a diary and you've got days

JVDR: Yes

MM: So is it quite a nice tracking device when you're revising?

JVDR: Ja and you'll see why. The first term is the slowest term, because it always sets up everything. Then the second term is quite often where all the action, the major action, starts happening. The third term is always that mysterious time, it's the dying season or the silly season where things can go really pear-shaped, and then the fourth term just goes and that's also because I want . . . I want the moments, like in this book, it starts from about July. You'll see that you battle to put the book down, because it just goes and it goes and everything starts unravelling very fast.

MM: But they actually plan the school year like that. The first term is always longer, because –

JVDR: They do and that's what it was, ja.

MM: – Because people, the fatigue of the emotions of the year, I think builds up.

JVDR: Yes, and the fourth term, the exams, is always a short term and you've always got exams and I always had cricket and it seemed to go by in a blur. So once you got to the Michaelmas holidays, you've basically broken the back of the year and that's the same thing with a book: you know, and obviously this Third year is all about the selection of prefects and the stratifying of the Crazy Eight so they've got, they're going to be broken up. One is going to be Head of House and three or four are going to be prefects and the rest are going to be dumped, you know.

MM: Ja, and there's that pressure of becoming an adult now.

JVDR: Ja, and they all start vying and they start getting this sort of boy politics, if you like, as opposed to bashing up against an institution. This time it's more the sense of one-up-manship and if you're down it means I'm up. You know, that means I'm more in the running and Boggo drives that hugely, because he's so desperate to be a prefect, you know. I mean, the fact that he changes his religion and signs up for confirmation classes – denies his Jewishness.

MM: Someone said to me once that their son-in-law apparently thinks he's – Boggo was based on him. Interestingly, I don't know if he's real, but he said, "He's exactly like Boggo. . . . Well. it's all true except for the sex bits." And I thought, "There *is* no Boggo without the sex bits"

JVDR: [Laughing] Well said, girl!

MM: There was a fun story. Dorian Haarhoff said there was a children's writer who was writing a book and a group of elves showed up and said, "Hello, we're in the story," and she said, "There aren't any elves in this story, go away," and they said, "But we're here now." Do you ever get that feeling of elves? Do you ever get that feeling that characters just arrive from nowhere, they just come from out of the blue sky, that you hadn't expected?

JVDR: No

MM: Not really?

JVDR: No. My characters are my pillars. They are my pillars. I think, where other people have their story that flows and then the characters sort of fit in around it, for me characters are everything. It always has been. I'm an actor and I was a playwright where you start from characters and that's why I do feel confident going forward with my writing career, because I know I have the ability to create very visceral and realistic characters and characters that . . . I'm a good mimic, so if I was going to turn you into a character, I think I could turn you into an interesting character, you know. Well, I think I *would* . I'd have to get to know you better, but I think I could and so for me character – for example, Garlic – is hugely important to this novel, because he's the new member of the Crazy Eight and obviously there's a few risks with that, because people are so attached to your Verns and Boggos and Fatties and Rambo and Spud and Mad Dog and Gecko, who was obviously dropped off. So this guy has got a lot to live up to and he has to find a niche. He can't just slip into Mad Dog's niche or he can't slip into Gecko's niche. He has to find his own niche and have his own energy. So he's coming into a very settled sort of combo that works very well, but I not only want to get him to settle in there, but I want him to add – add value. So, so obviously a guy like Garlic, I think very carefully about, and last year Alexander Shortstay – I don't know if you remember that boy who came in *The madness* – sorry, *The madness continues*, (sorry I'm talking about "last year") but in *The madness continues* he comes for like three days and he's this tall guy; he arrives at the school and then he plays, Mad Dog hits him on the head and his Dad has got

into nefarious activities and he suddenly leaves. He goes missing, because his Dad is actually a bit shady and he's suddenly arrested, or something, and he's called Alexander Shortstay. Now originally, Alexander was going to be my new character, but then I pulled the plug, because I didn't like him. I didn't feel he was right, so he came and he went. And so this year, I am very brutal, like if he's not right, I get rid of them. You know, just like I got rid of Mad Dog, because I couldn't carry on with Mad Dog. I could not carry on, because it *always* went to the same conclusion. If you've got Mad Dog there and they go visit the New Boys. Now this year we've got the Fragile Five are the new little chaps

MM: They're like the Famous Five?

JVDR: But anyway, the Fragile Five, so if you've got Mad Dog going in there, there's no ways you can have a sort of clever sort of [outcome to the scene] whereas if Boggo and Fatty are driving it and Rambo sits in there just watching it, you suddenly have a much more, sort of –

MM: It's more a psychological sort of –

JVDR: Yes and it can be much more funny, whereas Mad Dog is going to be hanging some boy up, or tying him up or hanging him out of the window, or brutalizing somewhere. So that's why I had to get rid of it, because of . . . and Gecko had obviously died for Spud so that Spud could have that awakening and that's what happens – through death we have an awakening. Through one person's death we, you know, it's all part of the cycle of life and so forth, so I've now set up this dying season. So obviously somebody always dies in the book, but I've got to do that in such a way that it doesn't seem sort of crazy. So I will be interested to see what you think of who or what dies during the dying season this time; and also then it sets up this idea that what's going to go during the fourth book. You know, November. You know, we had Gecko in the first year, Freddie Mercury in the second. You will see what dies in the third and it's a kind . . . of sort of . . . it's just a thematic thing, it's a quirk if you like.

MM: It's like that randomness is life that becomes a pattern that makes someone almost superstitious about things

JVDR: Yes, yes

MM: And then it kind of . . .

JVDR: You bring it on yourself almost, yes.

MM: Or you also start noticing things you might not have noticed, like when Freddy Mercury died, "Oo, he's died now. That's because of . . . "

JVDR: Yes, exactly.

MM: So you start making a false cause and effect.

JVDR: Yes exactly, exactly, ja.

MM: Do you have to have to go at 6, I presume?

JVDR: No, no. I don't. My lady is waiting in the corner, but she looks pretty happy, "hey? Prudence? Prudence, are you happy?"

JVDR: This is Marguerite.

MM: Hi

JVDR: That's Lee-Ann. I call her Prudence, though. She's my publicist from Penguin. [To Lee-Ann] Do you mind if we take a few more minutes?

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANN): No, please,

JVDR: Are you not in a hurry, or anything, hey?

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): I'm about to order some food, because I realised that breakfast this morning was a packet of cashew nuts.

JVDR: Oh, dear.

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): And lunch was half a packet of pistachios.

JVDR: Okay, so we carry on.

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): So I'm about to have a steak.

JVDR: Oh, great.

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): Please carry on.

JVDR: Prudence, you're putting that steak on my bill as well, I bet, hey? Good thinking, girl.

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): It wasn't me who charged it to his . . . .

JVDR: Ja, greedy bastard!

MM: At some point, politely rescue him, because I have . . . I will just . . . I warned everyone I interview, I'm so interested, I was just -

JVDR: But it's in the interest of academia.

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): Send me the signal, send me the proverbial gesture

JVDR: [Laughter]

MM: It's all purely academic interest. I'm just going to sit here until like, you know, John's eventually lost weight

JVDR: [Laughs]

MM: Be like *Great expectations* with cobwebs everywhere

JVDR: No, but I, to be honest, I'm loving talking about the process, because you can vouch for me [to Lee-Ann], I never talk about the process of writing. I only ever talk about –

MM: Really? And tell me about the story?

JVDR: Ja, ja, ja.

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): Absolutely. No, no, please carry on, as long as you are strong, I'm going to have my . . .

JVDR: Okay, when you're finished eating, we'll wrap it up, but that will give us some time.

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): That will be cool.

MM: Great.

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): And then I've got my laptop here if you want to . . . ?

JVDR: Ja, I want to see that audition. I'm looking forward to that, thanks.

PRUDENCE (LEE-ANNE): Well, please

MM: This is all so intriguing. I love this interview. In my transcript, I end up putting those, you know, "Insert comments" in and I keep putting in things like, "At this point", you know, "so-and-so came in and then I spoke to her."

JVDR: [Laughs]

MM: What is her role in your life?

JVDR: She's the Cape Town publicist. So she's basically my Mom, while I'm in Cape Town – like the Book Fair and now everywhere; she takes me everywhere and makes sure the kids line up in an orderly queue, and don't storm me.

MM: So she should really be facing me with a baseball bat at this point to make sure you get released!

JVDR: Ja, but this is my last thing for today; we've got an interview, the audition for Spud – a boy's Audition in LA and I couldn't download it onto my computer, so she's got it on her computer. So that's why she's here.

MM: Because you're doing a film next, aren't you?

JVDR: Ja and you know, John Cleese is attached [contracted to act in the movie] too.

MM: Ooh, John Cleese is the guy, now he's making . . .
JVDR: Exciting, hey?

MM: It's good enough for somebody to do that . . .

JVDR: And Michaelhouse has given us permission to shoot on location, so we're going to be shooting it in Spud's dorm and . . .

MM: Well, as you say, it would be the best thing that's happened to you!

JVDR: I know, so anyway, we haven't got a signatory yet, because the money . . . but we're waiting.

MM: Well that is the stamp on the quality of your comedy.

JVDR: Thank you so much, hey. He can only be as wonderful as the Guv

MM: Ha! Absolutely, you know!

JVDR: He'll be wonderful.

MM: The Guv is a sublime character. I can see why he would want to play him. Because the Guv's one of my absolute favourite characters.

JVDR: Oh, good. So we've got to hold thumbs that the money flows, because R35 million is a lot of money to raise now, and with the history of film in South Africa – that it never makes money – it's hard to get these guys who've invested before to . . .

MM: You've got to keep telling them the history of books in South Africa that nobody reads . . .

JVDR: Ja, we've got a team of guys working on it and we've got also like the Art Director from *Shakespeare in Love* who won the Oscar. She's now said, "My husband went to Michaelhouse, I want to work on it. I don't care if you don't pay me a cent."

JVDR: So suddenly, we've got . . .

MM: And you are an acting person, so this must be *so* much fun?

JVDR: Well, ja and also great, because like I am like sort of . . . but I don't have to carry the can. I'm the Executive Producer, so I'm like this consultant in there. So that's why everything, like this audition . . . because the director has already looked at it and the producer, but now they're waiting for my opinion; they regard my opinion as very important, which is wonderful, you know.

MM: I presume that *Spud* was sort of under wraps by the way, things have . . . ?

JVDR: No, no, I've just announced it this week. We haven't got him signed yet, because we're waiting for the money; he's waiting for now the contract, but he's accepted, so he's what they call, "Attached to the project" . . .

MM: Well, good on you. The sign of this is just, your book is really that good.

JVDR: Ja and it's amazing, hey?

MM: Well, I honestly think you're so brave, because really, South African fiction tends to be very much on the heavy side.

JVDR: Yes, ja.

MM: And you actually amazingly tackled the apartheid years, while being actually funny and . . .

JVDR: A lot of people don't give me that credit. They kind of go, "Ah, it's popular fiction," and they compare me to Dan Brown and J.K. Rowling and stuff, but I'm glad you see that . . .

MM: I wanted to do an MA in Creative Writing and the only people doing it at UCT – if you like J.M. Coetzee – and I think he's a *fantastic* writer . . .

JVDR: Yes, he is fantastic.

MM: . . . So he's a fantastic writer, but my teacher . . .

JVDR: But he's morbid, hey?

MM: My teacher – I said to her, "I love comedy" and I said to her, "You know, I'm not sure if I want to end up writing like him." You know, the people I've seen, his students, tend to write very similar, dark , heavy fiction and I said, "I don't think that's what I want to write." I said, you know, "I like Chick Lit like Marian Keyes's stuff"

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: I like the comedy where issues crop up every now and then.

JVDR: Exactly

MM: My lecturer had been I think one of his supervisors for his academic . . . And she said, "If you're asking me if he's got a really good sense of humour, I'll have to say no; he's not going to be your cup of tea."

JVDR: Ja, he's a difficult guy.

MM: And I actually signed up for the course and everything and I said, you know – and there isn't really that background in South Africa . . .

JVDR: Ja, well, also because you know what? It's so looked down upon, it's so looked down upon. People see it as a secondary art whereas actually, to write angst is easy, you know; to write comedy is bloody hard. It takes technique, you need technique. Whereas writing angst you can just pour it out of your guts, so you know, if you're writing a play script: he arrives, he throws her up against the wall, she screams, "Please, God, no", he smashes her. Her teeth fly out of her mouth and she collapses on the carpet in a pool of blood, going, "My God, my God, what have you done to me?" and everyone goes, "God, that's powerful, hey, that's so hectic, that scene when he smashed her up". Come on, I mean, we can all do that while standing on our heads, but to try and turn that into something funny, it makes it sick, it makes it weird, it makes it whatever, but it gives it another layer, you know. But obviously, comedy in South Africa . . .

MM: Very disturbing, versus funny, versus comedy

JVDR: Well, ja.

MM: Well comedy actually disturbs you more, because it shakes your equilibrium a lot.

JVDR: Well, it's that thing, what is the thing? Ah, comedy's the flip side of tragedy and somebody, somebody breaking a nail and blood seeping out their hands is tragedy, but somebody falling down a manhole to their death, is comedy, you know, and there's that great sense of exactly where do we draw the line on this whole thing? You know and it's just another cloak. It's really a cloak. What I like to see comedy as, is the cloak which I wrap around *Spud* which, gives it this lovely sheen of bright colours so that everyone goes, "Oo, I want that, I want that"; " I'm going to laugh and have a great time" – but underneath is this quite serious, well you know, I wouldn't say, "serious", but . . .

MM: Well there's this thing of the clown crying underneath his makeup, you know.

JVDR: That's it, it's the clown, ja.

MM: What interests me is you wrote a really funny book – you know, the one . . .

JVDR: Ja.

MM: And that's interesting, because it's probably almost opens you up for the sad bits.

JVDR: But you look at like these Rowan Atkinson and John Cleese himself, all these big comedians, they're depressive people. I mean, they're very depressive people and I'm sure John Cleese might be a disappointment when I meet him in the flesh, because he's not going to be doing funny walks down Warriors' Walk and going, "'Scuse me!" [in a posh accent, laughing] – but exactly, exactly.

MM: But I suppose you get the same thing, if people are disappointed that you're not constantly spouting jokes.

JVDR: Well, exactly, I'm not hilarious and that's the problem, these people think I've got to be a joke a minute.

MM: Funny all the time?

JVDR: Ja, ja.

MM: Margie Orford writes – I don't know if you've read her stuff?

JVDR: I haven't, but I know of her very well.

MM: – detective fiction, but really, really good as well; she does that kind of commercial fiction, but commercial is despised, it's not literary and yet, it's – I think – sometimes harder to write, because you don't know who your audience are. Like an actor -you don't know how they're going to respond and you've got to keep them on the edge of their chairs – it's a skill, it's a huge skill.

JVDR: I'm starting a new genre in South African literature and it's been provoked out of me, because I've now been shunted into the realm of popular fiction. Whatever that entails, but popular fiction. So you've got literary fiction which you can get nominated for those *Sunday Times* Literary Awards, then you have popular fiction, which means you're not even considered for that and it's not something that really bugs me, because I mean, I don't need to win an award to know that it's good, but you know, I mean, I know *Spud* was like, it was very close and I know some of the judges have said, it should've gone into that first five. But the fact that they didn't, I think was quite important. I think it says, if you're thinking of *Spud* being a landmark in South African literature and it wasn't in the first five books of the year, wasn't even nominated, it's not something that I feel bitter about at all, but it certainly, for me, nails the colours to the mast. So I want to start a new genre, which is not literary fiction: if I'm going to be "popular fiction", then we're setting up the genre of "*un*popular fiction". There is no literary fiction. It's unpopular fiction or popular fiction. So if you sell less than 5000 books, you are unpopular fiction and that's your genre. Now I'm sure they're not going to be thrilled about that, but, if they want to call me "popular", then I want to call them "unpopular" and I do believe it . . . . I mean, I don't know who "them" is, I don't known who "them" is.

MM: Because it is this kind of attitude, "You sell and therefore you appeal to horrible beer-drinking louts."

JVDR: Yes, exactly.

MM: "You like to be despised, therefore we despise your book."

JVDR: So let's call a spade a spade in South African writing and say, "Let's not kid ourselves, this is unpopular fiction. It doesn't sell more than 1,000 copies, nobody wants to read it, nobody's interested" – so you're reaching nobody.

MM: Well, you proved everyone wrong, because everyone always said there *isn't* a market in South Africa.

JVDR: Ja, but it's a freak, hey, it's a freak. I mean, really, I'm often asked to account for it and all I can do is talk about the comedy and the fact that it's obviously . . . It's a lot of markets, but really there's no accounting for it. So I know it's a freak and you know what?

MM: It isn't a freak. I'm not sure that's the word for it. It's good, I think it's good, for the first time I've read something and gone, "This is really –"

JVDR: Yes.

MM: I mean, it's one of the first times time I've read something and gone, "Wow, this is amazing and it's deep and it's brilliant and it's well-written, the command of language is amazing . . ."

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And the whole thing, the metaphors are beautiful, but it hasn't made me . . . You know, yes, this is something mature.

JVDR: I mean, you know what it is?

MM: This is South Africa's cure . . .

JVDR: Yes.

MM: You always feel we're the little poor boys compared to everybody else in the world.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: This is sparky.

JVDR: Something that you feel is of a standard to kind of . . .

MM: It's like we're all trying to be, I don't know, Alan Paton, or something. You know, we've got to be one of those flashes in the pan from ten years . . .

JVDR: I don't know who we're living up to be. Who are we trying to be? I mean, well, not me, but who are our writers trying to be? I don't know, because I feel in a way, I came in through the back door in this industry, so when I talk about people being unpopular fiction, I don't have any names, I don't have anybody who I'm thinking about. I'm just talking about this general thing where I'm talked about in the same breath as Dan Brown and J.K. Rowling, which in some ways is offensive and it gets my back up, but in other ways I go, "Okay, well, I suppose I should take it as a compliment." But I know if it's said or written by some university professor or university sort of creative writing person, that it's probably used as an insult or a barbed insult to sort of 'other' me. You know, the othering processes, so it's not threatening to you. Because you can't compare the local literature to *Spud* in terms of numbers and its reach, you "other" it, you know, put it in a box with Dan Brown and now you're South Africa's Dan Brown. I'm *not* that, I'm just . . .

MM: So many people call you . . . I mean, that's an insult if you're literary person, I suppose like 'commercial' art

JVDR: Ja

MM: And if you're a painter as well . . . .

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: Commercial art, meaning people actually want to have it in their homes, as opposed to people would rather die . . . .. There is commercial and then there's "airport fiction".

JVDR: Oh, ja, heaven forbid. They haven't called me that yet.

MM: But I'm afraid I am going to read you on the airplane and the thing is, I'm going to be stuck for a damn long time going via Dubai to the UK, my goodness! And I'm going to be travelling for 24 hours.

JVDR: Oh, my word.

MM: And then I have to present my paper at the conference the next day, so whatever I say I hope makes sense.

JVDR: You're going to be jabbering crazily, hey?

MM: I'm going to be speaking gibberish by then, but the fact is, I mean, if I'm stuck in one space and there's absolutely nothing else I can do, I want a *good* book. I don't just want a book where I'm thinking, "Oh hell, is this all I've got to read for the next six hours?" I want something bloody good that's going to take my mind off my aching legs and so on.

JVDR: Well, ja, true, but isn't that what literature, fiction needs to be? It's like you watch, you watch a good film on the screen. When I watch films and I fly, I don't go and watch the cheesiest film there. I'd rather watch the guy that's been nominated for an Oscar or that I haven't seen yet, you know and so it's . . .

MM: Success breeds success?

JVDR: Well, ja, you know, but anyway it's not something that I feel worried about, because I also feel like I've never really belonged in the South African literature scene. I feel like I'm an actor and I'm a theatre boy and I came in through the back door and I suddenly have jumped way, way ahead of the queue, way ahead of my standing and I haven't gone through UCT Creative Writing School and worked with John Coetzee like the . . .

MM: Everyone else.

JVDR: And really, I don't have a bone to pick with anybody. Because to my face, everyone's like, "Wow, you know, you're amazing. What's your secret?" kind of thing, but obviously, there must be sniping behind my back . . .

MM: I've not heard any sniping, but I . . .

JVDR: I mean, I know my publishers tell me that there are a lot of unhappy, sort of, unpopular authors. I don't ask for the names or anything, but I know that it has gone up people's noses sideways, because I mean, how miserable if 5,000 books is what you strive for,

because that's the best seller and then somebody goes and tramples on that badly, you know and I have, I've suddenly gone, "Well, now unless you sell a hundred thousand you're not, you know, you're not batting the big league, you know, whereas . . .

MM: Well, people also have to ask themselves if the style they've been aiming at for all these years is in fact a good style.

JVDR: Yes, then there's that sense of people going, "Well, I could very easily write a diary about my school days and nail it." But you know, it's one thing saying that and one thing doing it; , I mean, if it was that easy, I would write these things in three months, but it bloody takes me ages. I mean, it takes me 18 months from planning through to fruition and just writing a diary, really. You'd think, "Well, I should be able to stamp that out quicker."

MM: It's not just a diary though.

JVDR: Well, that's the point.

MM: If you were just rambling garbage it would be a diary, but you're actually telling a story and it's a very different thing –

JVDR: Yes, ja, I know.

MM: – From just reminiscing, or something.

JVDR: I know.

MM: But Lesley Beake says the same. She's a children's and young adults' writer

JVDR: Yes.

MM: and she writes mostly for school – for trade publishing.

JVDR: Right.

MM: She's written some absolutely beautiful books and done very well, actually – won prizes overseas and stuff - and she says that even if people interview her, , they don't even read the book. She says that she actually writes stuff under apartheid and if you had written it in an adult book, you would've been banned and arrested and observed by the police, but she says no-one ever bothers to read her books because they're for children, and she said there's just this idea that if you're write for children, it's easy.

JVDR: It's the same thing – you get "othered" – it's the "othering" process. If anything is threatening, it's "othered" and that's the law of the world, hey.

MM: Well, take Terry Pratchett who I think is the world's best-selling author of all time.

JVDR: Is he really, hey?

MM: And no one knows about him compared to J.K. Rowling.

JVDR: Ja

MM: He's hilarious

JVDR: He's hilarious

MM: I tried to interview him but he's got Alzheimer's and he can only write one -

JVDR: How old is he?

MM: Not very, I think he's in his 50s or so.

JVDR: Oh, shit.

MM: Ja, I tried to interview him because I'm very cocky.

JVDR: Wow.

MM: And they replied and said, no, he's only focusing on writing now because he's trying to get his last books out. But except for his children's books, because he writes fantasy fiction, he's completely sidelined from most literary prizes, because he's Sir Terry Pratchett actually, now, and he's been given that acknowledgement, although in some circles it's an insult as well to be 'Sir' – you know, the Queen honours people and knights you,

JVDR: Yes, well,

MM: But he also isn't considered adult reading by a lot of people just because he writes fantasy.

JVDR: Yes.

MM: And there are elves and dwarves in his books.

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: And yet anyone who's read his stuff knows it's not children's . . .

JVDR: No.

MM: He does write for children. He says it's the hardest work he does.

JVDR: Ja.

MM: He's only won prizes for children's books; his books are amazing and yet people don't respect them

JVDR: Well, Bryce Courtenay is a great example. The best-selling Australian novelist of all time, has never been invited to a single literature festival in his life. He's totally "othered" in Australia, there's no pride that

MM: He wrote *The Power of One*?

JVDR: Ja.

MM: And he's not invited to . . . ?

JVDR: Never been invited to a literary Festival.

MM: I'm a literature student and I don't understand, the one thing I deliberately did for this study . . .

JVDR: It's the snootiness of the intellectuals, I'm afraid.

MM: I'm not going to even go into the debate of whether any of the people I'm interviewing are 'literary' or not; I'm going into the debate purely from a, have they published, have they published successfully, have they published more than once and do they have a professional writing process – but apart from that, I don't care if you're getting reviews saying you're literature.

JVDR: Also, yes, but I think that's a valid point. I think often, the literary discussion and debates about literature are driven by academics, are driven by intellectuals and, not driven by writers. Many of whom are either not published, or unsuccessfully, you know, "unpopular authors", let's call it that, and these guys have got a bone to pick, because they're jealous, they go, "Well, my work, actually, I'm a far more intelligent – I write far greater stuff and why is this person selling 200 000 copies and why am I selling 3 500?"

MM: Well, it's because you appeal to the plebeians while they appeal only to a select few.

R: Yes, exactly, yes, ja, anyway. But let's move on from that, because it's not something that . . . probably I've overstated the point because I feel, to be honest, I've had a very, very clean ride and I don't think I've ever really had a hatchet job done on me and my publishers keep preparing me for . . . Let's say it's my publicist and Alice has said, "Well," she said, "It's going to come," and she was saying, "It will come now," but I think this third book's the best of the three. So I think it's going to be very hard for someone to go, "This is crap," you know.

MM: I agree with you, I thought the second one was for me even better although I wondered if it wasn't just because I was already into the characters.

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: So getting in was quicker for me . . .

JVDR: Ja.

MM: Than the first one.

JVDR: But you know, it makes sense that you get better as you go along. I mean, I'd like to believe the arc is upwards, not downwards, you know, but it is. I feel that with the first one, I didn't really quite know what I was doing, and with the second one I started to go with the medium. I think this one's now got a bigger scope than the second one. And it's funnier.

MM: More self-assured now.

JVDR: Ja, more self-assured.

MM: Can I go into some silly details? It's actually been very interesting asking this stuff. This kind of came out of my first interview and it's gone more and more in depth. What do you write on – is it paper, computers?

JVDR: Computer background.

MM: Typing straight onto computer, you don't longhand at all, really? No.

JVDR: New generation, hey?

MM: Ja, the guys as well quite interestingly. I've only done four people so it's not a statistic.

JVDR: No, you know, also I need, because in a sense . . . I do so much, like, changing – chopping and changing and deleting and adding. I look at a line and it's sort of, this weird thing where I look at a line – and I've always had this – I don't know whether it's just an instinctive thing, but I can't tell immediately if there's a single word that jumps out at me, or if it's a 60% line, or it's a 90 % line, or it's a 30% line; and if it's not a 90% line, then sometimes it just needs two more words. It's a funny science, but . . .

MM: Do you mean a sentence, or a line?

JVDR: A sentence. So you know, I just look at the line and the problem jumps - sort of has lights that flash at me and . . .

MM: So you're analyzing each chunk.

JVDR: It just doesn't read well and then I just know, either take the line out, or it just needs a little bit of massaging. It gets to that specific level where every single line in the whole book . . . nothing is just . . . It's just a line, but I know that then you over-obsess, but that happens later in the process . . . and I think people don't realise that, you know, but that's also part of the joy, because that's the romance of writing, but it comes down to the – as I say – a construction site, but I'm looking at every brick and going, "Okay, there's no fault lines in each brick", you know.

MM: The craftsmanship.

JVDR: It's craft, it's craft, it is craft.

MM: You're using very similar methods to Imraan Coovadia, which is interesting.

JVDR: Oh, interesting, yes.

MM: And yet you have a very different attitude to writing, and also interesting are the similarities and differences

JVDR: I'm going to be fascinated reading this in the end, because I want to see what these other guys are saying.

MM: Ja, no, what I think is so fascinating for all writers is that this stuff isn't talked about so explicitly. Do you use a desktop, or a laptop?

JVDR: A laptop.

MM: A laptop mostly?

JVDR: Ja.

MM: Why is that?

JVDR: Well, because I'm a bit of a nomad, so you know, it started with me being on tour with Mamba, writing *Spud* one, so it was the natural machine and now it's like, you know, travelling. So now it's sort of become, "That's my thing", and it's what I'm comfortable with.

MM: Any particular size, or shape, or type of laptop?

JVDR: No, because I tend to write a book on a computer and then I get a new one. I know that sounds like I've got far too much money, but I feel like my machine gets tired after . . .

MM: Is it all the different documents? Does it get cluttered?

JVDR: It's not even that. It's like a weird sense that I need a fresh page, I need something fresh, so it's almost like, well, that's my reward when I've finished. So I've just got a new laptop now. I had a *Spud One* laptop which crashed. The *Spud 2* laptop semi-crashed. And then my last laptop which I wrote, *Learning to fly* on, and now it's been put out to pasture. So I have all these old laptops.

MM: Do you have a preference, like for Apple, or a Mac, or a?

JVDR: No.

MM: No.

JVDR: I'm totally not technically orientated, so as long as the thing works

MM: And aesthetically orientated? Do you buy pretty laptops?

JVDR: Well, no.

MM: Not really?

JVDR: My new one is quite a grotesque piece, because I've got a friend who's like a dealer and he organizes everything. What worries me far more is the sense that all I want is everything. I want to be able to get the machine and then be able to click on e-mail and I can get straight on. I don't want to have to like do weird stuff and have to re-programme and configure stuff – I don't want any of that. I hate the details of technology. I'm going to show you my cellphone [a very basic, R300 Nokia].

MM: Yes, I think that's . . .

JVDR: This is the best-selling author's cellphone – the oldest Nokia you've ever seen! But it also like, "Okay, I know where everything is, I know that it's like so, *ou pallie*."

MM: Ja, simplicity is important.

JVDR: People's eyes get big when I pull that out, because they go like, "Bru . . . ?

MM: Ja, I know, I mean cell phones are such a big thing these days. Well, I thought mine was so fancy and it's already grotesquely out of date. My students are just appalled!

JVDR: Oh, I'm sure.

MM: And in terms of writing space: you write all over the world, but is there something you've always looked for in a writing space?

JVDR: Well, I, you know I live in Wombat's flat?

MM: Yes.

JVDR: So all those . . . you know . . . and now in this book I wrote a whole weekend in Wombat's flat, because they're fumigating the Milton House, because Dad finds two mice in

the garage door. So anyway, I write in a little nook; it's nothing more than just a lead-on from the lounge, a little nook, with my window here, and I've got a garden and then I've got Musgrave Road in Durban and I'm able to watch the passing trade go up and down Musgrave Road when I'm . . . . And otherwise, I just write and that's my place and I've written all three of the books there. But now I'm going to move, which is quite weird, because that fourth book won't be written there.

MM: And when you're travelling, like when you were in Hanoi, when you're in those places, do you look for a similar kind of working environment, or do you then write on the beach, or wherever?

JVDR: Well, this last, *Learning to fly*, I decided not to take my laptop. I decided a notebook would be the actual . . . just a real rough sort of . . . so because I felt like, I wanted to cut loose, but at the same time I felt like if the creative comes which it did, thank God! I can catch it all and then come home and write. Also, I can pump out sometimes 5000 words in a day, 4000 words in and day.

MM: Handwriting or typing?

JVDR: No, typing.

MM: Typing

JVDR: So I can do that in like five, six hours when I'm going and it's only two fingers.

MM: When? Is it only two fingers? That's so funny!

JVDR: Well, two, ja, exactly. I'm like Vern: I go, "Uh", I've got the tongue out, but when I go, I've got to race to keep up with my brain because my brain is going and I'm seeing the image and it's almost like a movie being played out and I can see . . . say, I've got Vern, Boggo, Fatty, Spud and Garlic in a scene and I can just see them. So I mean, a very standard day for me when I've really got into it, when I've got the bit between my teeth, 3000 words and if you think about that, it's only sort of 40 days, just over a month, and you've got a novel right there.

MM: But then it's a revising process.

JVDR: Yes, but I mean, it obviously doesn't work like that, because if I have a day where I write 5,000 I sometimes wake up the next day and feel just washed out completely. I just feel like I've just got nothing. So then I won't work that day. So you know and sometimes I'll take a whole week off, or go away, and I can just take my computer. Generally, I don't like to travel overseas with the laptop, because I feel like what's going to be interesting next year, I think what I'm going to do is go to the Kalahari again and plan it there. But I love a place where people can't get hold of me, because there's no cellphones, there's nothing and I don't think . . . And I think I might just do the notebook again and go there, fill the book, and then maybe I'll be living here then, find my writing spot and . . .

MM: And a silly question again, but what kind of notebooks do you use when you're write, is there a particular size that appeals to you?

JVDR: My girlfriend is a stationery Barbie, she has an unnatural desire for stationery, so she goes and buys me some like strange looking book and then, like, packs all these pens – you know what I mean? I'm just like, "God, just give me a Bic pen and any pad." I mean, I started writing Spud on a . . . in Zimbabwe in the hotel there – and also it's weird, I had this flashback – the first book I wrote, I wrote in the hotel pad with the hotel pen and I wrote the

first page and I folded it up, put it in my pocket and then brought it back home and then put that onto computer and started writing. That's how *Spud* began - on a hotel pad. I didn't know at the time, I thought, well, you know, this is just a doodle, you know. But that's where it began, in a hotel room, because that's also the nature of my life – I've been a nomad for so long now, you know.

MM: On the stationery side of it, is it more about convenience than about speed? Would you say, with the pen it's important that it writes well and you know, mustn't run out of ink halfway?

JVDR: No, a pen has to have feel, and particularly now with signings – because now signing a book, I mean, my wrist is just . . . I had 2000 people at the launch and I signed 1800 books in 12 hours. Probably in this last nine days, I've signed 5000 books and that's like, "Dear so-and-so", "Best wishes for Father's Day", or "Happy Birthday", or whatever, "John van de Ruit", date and then, "Thank you, there you go" and then they go.

MM: With Terry Pratchett what he says in his book, "From mother of all this" and he's got some very funny . . .

JVDR: Has he? Maybe I should start doing that.

MM: He's got special ones that he uses for people who irritate him by bringing too many books. You know, when they bring the hard copy and the soft copy?

JVDR: God, I've had that, when they have a packet of like nine books and they go, "I hope you don't mind." You don't mind, because they are buying your book, you know.

MM: I know, well, that's the thing.

JVDR: You go that's nine books somebody's just bought, you know!

MM: But at the same time, yikes!

JVDR: When *Spud* 1 was launched, their first print run was 4000 copies, which for them was a big gamble! Well, that's a lot, and I had my launch and at my launch, I sold I think 88 books and I was just like, "Oh, my God, that's amazing", because like if 3,000 is like sort of a bestseller, I'm like 3% of the way almost, you know. I was like, "Go, boy!"

MM: Oh well, if 88 people want to read your book it's a room full of people.

JVDR: But you know what is funny? The night of the launch they were already on their third reprint of *Spud*, because they went 4000, then they 2500, because they thought, "Well, we just need a little bit more" and then, , the sort of orders came . . . . I mean, it's quite weird, when I look back now -

MM: You've probably revived the printing industry.

JVDR: Having that theatrical side to me in *Mamba*, it also meant that I was able to get some nice press coverage from people who had always reviewed and were naturally interested, but it was weird how that started. There was a little bubble that started and then caught fire, ja.

MM: People, the reading in public, especially in book clubs and things, is very interlinked. There's a lot of reading by people, and I think, if you hear a book's good ,then you're more likely to read it than if it's just got a nice cover and title.

JVDR: Yes, exactly and English teachers are huge, because they not only spread to their kids, they spread to book clubs, they spread to other teachers, to parents, to everything, through staff things and it becomes viral. I mean, once it goes into that school system

MM: Schools have always been the one place anyone makes money

JVDR: That's the key, if you want to sell big numbers, ja. You've got to have that crossover teen appeal too.

MM: Ja, no, absolutely.

JVDR: So you get the Harry Potter market and the Dan Brown market.

MM: J.K. Rowling was a big success partly because she appeals to a massive range of age groups from –

JVDR: Yes

MM: -– You know, lit degree people through to little kids and it's just one of those things where you think, "Gosh, you know, someone's hit the spot here!"

JVDR: I know, amazing, but I mean, you know what? Her books are fantastic, hey?

MM: She's very, very good and people . . .

JVDR: She's very clever and she writes with such imagination; I mean, you forget because of all the hype that always covers everything and I know it will with *Spud* eventually, but when I read *Harry Potter*, it's got a beautiful quaintness . . . . And imagine that book sold like 4000 copies and you picked it up and you felt you discovered it , it would make such a difference. You'd go, "Oh, my God, you've got to read this. This is just phenomenally thought through."

MM: It is.

JVDR: But the moment it becomes big, then it's like, "Oh, it's *Harry Potter*" and it's . . .

MM: Ja, people go, "Of course you've read it because you know a lot of other people have read it.". Ja, it's actually a bizarre backlash of fame, isn't it?

JVDR: Of course, it is, ja.

MM: You start wondering if people are reading the book because the book's good, or because they've heard about it.

JVDR: Yes, but then when you have the sales and you have all that, you know what: like for me, if I don't get the awards and all that stuff, because I've bought my freedom, I've bought my ability to write more books, and to write what I want and to live a life that I've always wanted to live.

MM: And you've had an award.

JVDR: That's more to me than an award, or anything.

MM: You got an award from the reading public?

JVDR: Yes, yes.

MM: An award not everyone wins . . . .

JVDR: No, no, no, but it is a bit of a popularity contest. It's not a kind of award where you go, "Well, you know, it's a special . . . "

MM: So it's an investment reading a book –

JVDR: Yes, yes

MM: – Of time and money . . .

JVDR: Ja, but it's never going to win the Commonwealth Prize for Africa. You know, they'll give some serious Nigerian story about, whatever and that's the point; but I accept that, you know. And also, maybe guys who only sell a few thousand copies, or a few hundred copies, maybe that's the big break they need and I'm now got such a pull that I don't need that, so maybe that's all good in the end, you know.

MM: Getting into the publishing world: you have to know a little bit about publishers and publishing in some way. Was that important to you in the beginning?

JVDR: I knew nothing, hey, I didn't have a clue!

MM: How did you find, and get in, because that's quite a big thing

JVDR: I sent my book to Roy Sergeant who's a theatrical director. He's quite a big noise here and sort of a legend and he was quite a mentor for me in playwriting.

MM: OK, so you went through the theatre world?

JVDR: Well, I sent him my book, when I'd finished, to just get his feedback. He's the only person who predicted, he said: "Listen" (he calls me, "Boy") . . .

MM: Like a cowboy movie

JVDR: "This is a bestseller, this is roll-around-on-the-carpet hysterical . . . . I've been howling with laughter. I tell you, if we put this in the right hands, this could be a massive hit." I just, I mean, I was obviously naturally, hugely excited by that and he said, "Now listen, I know Alison Lowry from Penguin Books who's an old friend of mine, okay?"

MM: Alison?

JVDR: So he phoned Alison and said, "I've got a book here you've got to read, trust me." Alison didn't then go, "Okay, give it to me, give it to me." She said, "Okay, send it in, send it in," and I had to wait my four months for a reader of Penguin to read it and after four months, I got the word that they were excited. Alison sent me an email and said, "Listen, we're enjoying it. Don't give up hope, don't regard the silences as anything, it's just a process." Then they said to me, "We're going to publish it", but the fact that they printed 4000 showed that they thought –

MM: They were very enthusiastic.

JVDR: Enthusiastic, but they weren't also thinking, "This is a huge smash hit" you know, they were thinking . . .

MM: Well, they've got to think finances – they can't get too excited.

JVDR: Ja, it was the same year that Dalene Matthee's *Driftwood* – they did the English translation and that was their big release that year and it did sell very well. I think it sold 30 thousand or whatever and that was . . . .

MM: But she's very established.

JVDR: Yes and she'd already died and they got her last novel, so it was a kind of a . . . But anyway, I mean, there was certainly no sense from Penguin that it was . . . they were like, "Well, this is an interesting one. We'll see how it goes," but there was no real sense at the beginning that it was anything more than, perhaps, something interesting. And that's why I feel pleased in an inner sense . . . . Yes, there was that connection point, but it wasn't that much difference to if I'd phoned them and said, "Listen, I'm an actor. I've written this book, can I send it in?" It would've gone through the same channels, so I don't feel like . . .

MM: Do they read it even you're not . . . ?

JVDR: Exactly, they've got that slush pile and maybe it would've got me to the top of the slush pile, because they were going, "Oo, he's an actor, let's have a look," you know.

MM: Ja, or someone whose judgment they trust.

JVDR: But certainly, I don't feel that I got any special treatment, really, although Sarge did make sure it got read, at least: you know, it wasn't at the bottom of the slush pile. But still I had to wait my turn and then I had to wait a year after that, I had to wait 14 months after they told me, to get the book. So . . .

MM: No, it takes a long time!

JVDR: Ja.

MM: That's the thing, I think it's holding on in the beginning.

JVDR: Ja, ja.

MM: How would you describe your spelling ability?

JVDR: My spelling ability has diminished, thanks to spell-check. I mean, I'm sure a lot of people say that, but I second-guess myself now like when I'm signing, like five years, or ten years ago.– no, let's say ten years ago, if you asked me to spell "ebullient" I would have said, "Alright, well there it is." Now I go, "Is it one l or two? Okay, well, it doesn't matter. I'll just write two. Spell-check – oh, it is one - okay" . . . or whatever, you know and that's what it does.

MM: It gives you a second chance . . .

JVDR: Yes, but I think I've always spelt reasonably well. I'm not one of those people who . . . Now and again, I'll do something silly, like "aisle" or "isle", for example, I'll spell wrong throughout the whole book and Allison will then go, "Mr. van de Ruit, how do you spell, 'aisle'?" Then I'll go, "What are you talking about, like 'island', or are you talking about an . . . ?" "No, walking down the aisle." And I'll go, "Oh, a-i-s-l-e," and she goes, "Well, why do you spell it, 'I-s-l-e'?" you know. You'll suddenly get these funny things where you'll just go, one down, spell-check

MM: And while you're typing, does it bother you, or do you check afterwards, or does someone else check afterwards?

JVDR: This is how I write, generally starting at noon, because I'm a slow starter to the day and then I write until it gets dark. So afternoons are my time and then I get to . . . as it starts getting dark. I work at the window in the sun, and I've got the light coming through and the light goes down, as it starts getting dark. Generally, I'll find a place to stop and then I'll go back through it and proofread, correct, because I like to just vomit it out, because I feel if I keep going back, I break my rhythm, and my voice in my head is going so fast that I have to motor and then I clean it up. I mean, just semi-clean it up, then my girlfriend, Julia, usually comes with a glass of wine and that's why I like my sunset: a glass of wine and we read it together and . . .

MM: So she reads as you go along?

JVDR: She reads every day's work, if you know, so she's seen this process from the beginning and that's why she's so precious about*, Learning to fly*, more than the other books, because she feels a part of it. You know, I've really brought her in and then, what we'll do is chat about it and she'll be like, "This is so interesting, I love what you've done there," or, "Why did this happen?" and suddenly she'll ask me questions that make me go, "Oh ja, a good question," and she'll go, "I thought you were going to do this, that's a good idea" – and we have a brainstorm.

MM: Does it bother you? Are you quite happy with that team work?

JVDR: I'm totally unprecious, hey. Totally unprecious

MM: That is so rare.

JVDR: It's words, they're all words, they're words.

MM: That is very rare. Most people can't show their close family.

JVDR: It's arrogance and ego, I'm telling you. You take ego and arrogance out and you can be a much better. If you take that preciousness out, they'll be even better, I guarantee you. And then, generally, I play my guitar after that, because then my brain is going crazy and I play guitar, we sing songs and I just strum around and we have a whiskey or two and then that's how I sort of unravel and sort of shed the skin, if you like.

MM: So it's a kind of release of pressure?

JVDR: Yes and then we go and make dinner together and then I generally let it go by then.

MM: Is it quite important that you've got a fairly stable relationship? Life is quite crazy and nomadic, so is that stability important?

JVDR: Yes, I mean, I think Jules and I have found each other in that way and it's really worked well and I think she's . . .

MM: And in your writing process, is that important?

JVDR: I think so. You know, I mean, I hate having something on. Like for example, if I've got to meet a friend for lunch, I probably won't write that day, because the lunch will go on till 3, 4 and then I won't come back and write. I'm not of those persons who go, "Okay, I've

got an hour and a half. Now I'm going to quickly shoot it down". Not like McCall Smith who writes on 'planes and he's writing three novels at once.

MM: His writing process is so . . .

JVDR: Ja, I mean, I did a talk with him, which was hysterical. I mean, he's just a genius. I mean, I thought I was quite good at talking until this guy! Oh God, I mean, I was just like] you know, he's just amazing, an amazing orator. You know, he start off, "Last week when I was in Santa Barbara . . . " – international Man of Mystery!

MM: So that whole relationship being stable, was helpful in that sense?

JVDR: I think it has helped, certainly, although it's only in this third book that it's really got into a sort of groove. With *The Madness Continues*, as I said, I was still touring theatres, so Jules's has kind of been staying at home and I was away; it's only during this process that we've really kind of got into a groove and I like this rhythm I've got into.

MM: Because you've got quite an arty life, but you don't seem to have the sort of artistic sex-drugs-and-rock 'n roll, tormented kind of life?

JVDR: Not that you know of.

MM: Well, is there it?

JVDR: But no, you know, I'm actually just quite a normal, regular guy. I don't have to claim to be artistic, I don't have to play the artist. My brain works in strange ways. I mean, I see humour in just about everything, even in death, in funerals. I mean, funerals make me crack up in laughter. I mean] trust me, at my own funeral, I'll be sitting there, looking down, howling with laughter at all these people sniffing. I guess the sense is that, when you don't take yourself incredibly seriously, then you realise that life is short and you do what you can and you throw out there whatever is in your heart and soul and your brain – that's all we can do. You can't try and be more than that – when you are driven by being someone as opposed to actually just being [who you are].

[Interruption]

MM: Hullo, darling [to a toddler that arrived to steal our chips].

JVDR: Hoo!

MM: I've got one of these.

JVDR: Rather you than me. That would cause damage to my writing, my carefully honed thing.

MM: Thinking of the next generation, because you have done a lot with schools and teachers and teenagers and so on, what advice would you give a young aspiring writer? You know, someone who's still in school and so on? About what would be important to them if they want to write?

JVDR: Yes, first, don't be precious – and I do believe this, that's one. Two is just write, get it out there. Don't talk about writing, don't fear it, don't be insecure. Insecurity comes from ego, and it's married to preciousness. It's that kind of sense of, "Oo, I've put this page down, it's mine!" Don't, you know, if somebody's like even remotely not raving about it, freak out. And the other thing is just try and open up your mind and let it go, let it happen. Just stop,

stop, you know, we always, we always, we're too terrible. Just allow whatever is in there, your guts, allow it to come from deep inside, you know.

MM: Would you like a chip? Okay, and if you were giving advice to teachers, because you talk a lot about the uninspiring teachers and the inspiring teachers, what advice would you give to, like, an English teacher, teaching creative writing? What should they not do and what should they do that you think would really be damaging, or very helpful?

JVDR: Well, you know, I think the great problem with teachers is that their thing is to get their kids to pass, and then the way that we're taught is all wrong

MM: Exam-orientated teaching?

JVDR: It's all just about cramming and it's all, you know, the people who get As at school, get As for writing in Matric and essays. I never got an A for an essay, never! I never did and the thing with writing is to open up your brain and to debate the world and to challenge all that stuff – and the teachers who make you challenge and think –

MM: Ja, no, absolutely.

JVDR: – I think are the great teachers.

MM: So they think beyond school and into just life in general.

JVDR: Exactly.

MM: To beyond the exam.

JVDR: Argue about life and debate life and don't just take everything as face value – or think that you have to have three of these [gestures to the toddler] and get married, or else you're not going to be happy.

MM: Ja, no, it's true.

JVDR: Although, I can see you're a very happy mother.

MM: Well, actually these days, the trend is much more to say, "You shouldn't have children, or you'll never be happy, because they just take away all your freedom"

JVDR: Well, ja, that's true.

MM: But they're a whole other life experience

JVDR: Of course it is, yes, of course it is. Maybe you can write about that as well

MM: When you're ready. I mean, if you're not ready, absolutely not. How old are you now?

JVDR: 34

MM: Oh, that's terribly old. You're one older than me, ha, ha!

JVDR: You are 33?

MM: Ja, ja, so that's interesting, ja. Because I thought, that's about where you are, because *Spud* really is, as I say, pretty much in your high school years

JVDR:  Yes, ja.

MM:  I have to end on a question about *Spud.*

JVDR:  Ja, let's get back to the point!

MM:  No, it's not the point at all.  Thank you very much, it's been astonishingly valuable.

JVDR:  Thank you. I feel like it's a huge plane wreckage you've now got to sift through to find the diamonds, but good luck. I'm glad I'm not doing that!

MM: No, no, no, many, many diamonds.

JVDR:
And I'm looking forward to reading the whole thing when it's done.